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*The*  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY  
THEATRE

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LONDON: GEORGE G. HARRAP & CO. LTD.

*The*  
TWENTIETH-CENTURY  
THEATRE

**BY**

# FRANK VERNON

**AUTHOR OF**

**"MODERN STAGE PRODUCTION"**

**WITH AN INTRODUCTION**

**BY**

# JOHN DRINKWATER

**GEORGE G. HARRAP & COMPANY LTD.**  
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## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE primary magic of the theatre is the magic of the spoken word," says Mr Vernon at the beginning of his little book, and at once we recognize a critic who knows what he is talking about. Mr Vernon's individual judgments may be provocative; they very often are. I myself, for example, think that he over-rates the most popular dramatist of the present moment, that he hardly pays due tribute to Mr Iden Payne's share in the work of the Gaiety Theatre, that he is rather less than handsome about Sir Arthur Pinero, and that his Honours List is perhaps a little arbitrary in including, shall we say?—no, we will not say—and omitting, for instance, Mr Nigel Playfair. I could wish also that Mr Vernon had sometimes allowed himself more room for exposition, as in his chapter on the one-act play, where the survey, by Mr Vernon's own standard, seems to be a little inadequate. Nor is our difference of opinion confined to individual preferences. Having for some years taken a small part in the fight for the integrity of the provincial theatre, I have every sympathy with



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the refusal to admit London as the sole arbiter of taste, but I think Mr Vernon overdoes it when he says that "the life of the English provinces is so much larger a thing than the life of the home counties and London." It is no disloyalty to an old and deeply cherished association to say that, taken in the aggregate, this, intellectually and artistically, is not so.

These disagreements, however, leave me with the conviction that Mr Vernon has within a very small compass written the best book hitherto produced on a subject which he claims, and rightly, will take a very important place in the history of the English theatre. Literature without drama is useless in the theatre; drama without literature may achieve some life there, but it is a life that has hardly any interest for people who have taken the trouble to become familiar with the significant art of the world. The only hope for a theatre that shall compete in intelligent appeal with the National Gallery and Everyman's Library and the Queen's Hall is a drama created by men who being masters of the "magic of the spoken word" have been encouraged to become also masters of stage life. This partnership between literature and the theatre, as is well known, had been in abeyance for nearly two hundred years, and was resumed only at the point where Mr Vernon's story begins.

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That his book is well written I suppose every one will agree, but it has the further great advantage of being really well-informed. A work of this kind so often breaks down under the test of analysis at any point by the reader with inside information, but Mr Vernon's knowledge is always exact and first-hand. A sound general principle, direct information, and a forceful and witty style are imposing recommendations for a book, and Mr Vernon can claim them all. When he says a good thing it is always the better for having grown out of an ample and convincing context. "The new sort of play did develop a habit of beginning where the old sort left off"; "There is need for something solid about which character can be characteristic"; "The unexpected should occur in the words, not in the accessory"; "War didn't damage only the drama; it soiled the playhouses: it raped them. But the flappers didn't care; nobody cared; there was a War on, and why blame the flappers for caring nothing for decent tradition when Lord Rothermere wanted to turn the British Museum into offices for the Air Force?" These are not happy phrases thrown off with journalistic ease; in each case they clinch a balanced and well-conducted argument. We have to know a good deal about theatrical production and its history in the past twenty years, to know it as Mr Vernon knows it and is able to record

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it, before we can appreciate the perfectly timed significance of so simple a conclusion as, "The Court under Barker was naturalism *con brio*; there were producers after Barker who left the *brio* out."

Mr Vernon's concern is chiefly with the pre-War twentieth-century theatre in England. His account of that is representative and responsible, and verdicts in future are not likely to differ materially from his own. His ruthlessly witty analysis of the War years in the theatre, again, is almost compensating joy for the flippant banality and cynicism that disgraced us in those days. His story of the post-War theatre is necessarily more fragmentary and told under greater difficulties. Having had no hand in the management of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre since 1918, I may without immodesty claim that a greater consideration might have been given to Mr Jackson's achievements there through a period when the Repertory spirit elsewhere in the provinces of England seems to have been defeated. Though it should perhaps be added that Mr Vernon does justly draw attention to the smaller enterprises throughout the country, of which not much has yet been heard in the world of fashion, even of intellectual fashion, but where in the hands of village and community players serious dramatic life has been fostered, and where perhaps

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the hopes of to-day may most profitably look for encouragement.

Not that the London theatre is at present by any means the cause only for dejection. Hardly a week passes in which the intelligent playgoer (I mean the playgoer who when he wants to be amused declines to be put off with *Comic Cuts*, and who when he wants to be stimulated finds the psychology of the Thick Ear insufficiently subtle) cannot enjoy himself in one or another of the theatres. And perhaps one of the most hopeful signs of the post-War drama is a gradual shifting of interest from what may be called seedy to what may be called heroic life. The realism of the first years of the twentieth century, which found its apotheosis in the Manchester School, performed an invaluable service in restoring sincerity to the stage, in making the theatre, as Mr Vernon says, "a place not only for hacks but for artists." But there inevitably came a time when audiences, intelligent audiences, were a little enervated by plays in which they were provoked not so much to admiration as to a sympathetic condescension. Mr Vernon shows that he is not insensitive to the new needs when he writes, "There is no reason why drama should sit down, content with the naturalistic play, and should feel that it has no more worlds to conquer. The novel has been attacked by a disease

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called psycho-analysis, and is recovering from that malady ; drama has that warning before it, and, of course, the revolt from realism began long before the War." The fact is that the supreme exaltation of drama can only be achieved when the life presented is such that an audience finds itself straining in happy spiritual exercise up to its tragedy or achievement. It is not for nothing that the great dramatists of the world have always made the figures of their plays a little greater in stature than the common man. The great buffoons of comedy and the great victims of tragedy alike have always been something heroic in their measure, no matter in what environment they should move. And the post-War theatre in England whenever it has become significant has done so by respecting this tradition. Plays like *Outward Bound*, *Back to Methuselah*, *The Conquering Hero*, *Phœnix*, *The Lost Leader*, *John Fergusson*, *The Likes of Her*, and *The Bill of Divorcement*, very various in their defects and qualities, are alike in admitting an infusion of this heroic life, in attempting at least, each in its own way, the heights of a great argument. If the future should happily bring us splendid achievement in this kind, it will have to remember always with gratitude the foundations that were laid in the early days of the century when the Court Theatre was the wonder of the town, and half a dozen

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gallant enterprises in the provinces were starting their fires from Miss Horniman's torch. When, as will happen in a few years, those days have become a legend of the theatre, the new enthusiasts will be grateful for Mr Vernon's plain and authoritative record, just as we to-day are grateful to him for ordering our minds so well upon events that we have seen.

JOHN DRINKWATER

LONDON

*May 1924*



# *The* TWENTIETH-CENTURY THEATRE

## CHAPTER I

### *Why Go to the Theatre?*

A POINT to be made at the beginning is that there are two theatres, the theatre of drama and the theatre of musical comedy and revue ; and if progress is in question, the development of the lighter stage, both technically and socially, is probably a more surprising phenomenon of the last thirty years than the development of serious drama. It has reacted upon serious drama, it has caused drama, in sheer self-defence, to extend itself upward ; the pressure from below has squeezed out of serious drama a superior vintage, and the more the two are separated the better for the higher artistic interests of the theatre. They don't mix.

More is to be said later about that ; let it pass, for the moment, that there are two distinct theatres, that a strongly marked distinction between them is to the advantage of both, but that the chief concern of these pages is with the theatre of drama.



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The query "Why go to the theatre?" shall be answered brutally and candidly in the case of the theatre of revue. The answer is that people go for general reasons applicable to both theatres and for the particular object of receiving a tonic to their animal spirits. Ask why they go to a revue, and the reply hypocritically may be, "Because I like light music"; it may silently be a wink, or it may frankly be the acknowledgment that they go to procure the emotions of mixed bathing in a place where those emotions are not corrected by cold water. Revue sketches frequently reach a high standard of worldly-wise wit; they are able dramatizations of smoking-room stories; they are even sometimes able little tragedies, to point a piquant contrast; but physical audacity (which means as near an approach to nudity as the Censor will allow) is the backbone of revue, and usually it is a very naked spine. Musical comedy keeps to a higher standard, and it is difficult in many cases to determine where light opera ends and where musical comedy begins; tunefulness, at any rate, is the *clou* of musical comedy, though without a comedian of infectious high spirits no musical comedy can hope to succeed, and the embarrassed theatre-goer who has recourse to a wink when asked why he goes to a revue could justly assert that light music and the engaging patter of some wizard of nonsense are the magnets which draw him to musical comedy.

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Now the danger of idealists is that they are people with too high an opinion of human nature, and the charge the idealist of the drama brings against his fellow-men is that the shallow creatures will persist in going to the theatre as 'a night out.' Heaven forfend solemn playgoing! The theatre is necessarily a night out because one does not arrive inside a theatre by staying at home, and while nobody but a bigot objects to occasional theatre nights which are care-free jollifications, there is every reason why every theatre night should not be a revue night. Revues, really, need defence; and we haven't to-day a Charles Lamb to defend them as he defended Restoration drama. But Cloudeuckoo-land is a perilous everyday, or every night, resort, and even Lamb himself put it, "It is good *now and then* for a dream-while or so to imagine a world with no meddling restrictions, the Utopia of gallantry where pleasure is duty and the manners perfect freedom." Much virtue in that "now and then." And the law of supply and demand actually settles the question against the stern moralists; there are not enough revues for every night because they are not demanded every night, and the not-too-stern moralist can find a sane satisfaction there and a malicious satisfaction in the frequenting of the Bankruptcy Court by producers who have vainly imagined that the demand for revue is infinite and indiscriminating.

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The retort to the idealist who protests that people regard the theatre as a night out is, "Which night?" and it is the other nights, nights neither of musical comedy nor of revue, as to which the question is now put, "Why go to the theatre?" The temptations to stay at home and the temptations, alternatively, to go anywhere but to the theatre are so strong as to lead to the conclusion that playgoing survives in the face of multiplied competition because it has behind it the sentiment that the theatre is a joyous place. And if the idealist is pleased to take exception to that sentiment he is puritan in the blackest sense of the word and an enemy to his own ideals, because without the feeling that the theatre is joyous the theatre would cease to exist, and the value of ideals about a non-existing theatre is below zero.

The theatre survives because it is the best means of satisfying human desire for the emotions received from witnessing drama. It is not the only means; that is where competition comes in; and sport is the strongest competitor of the theatre, weakened only by the fact that most, but not all, spectacular sports must be seen in daylight. Boxing, for instance, is crude drama which as entertainment competes directly by taking place in the evening. The leisured conflicts of the cricket-field and the more concentrated conflicts of football and tennis are less direct but none the less strong competitors;

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so is the drama of the racecourse and (again an evening event) the drama of the bridge-table. The other chief competitors are print and the kinema, the drama of fiction and the drama of photographs, the one strongly tempting to stay by the fireside, the other offering on easy terms a pale and reduced substitute for the night out at the theatre. It may seem, in some of these examples, that the word 'drama' is misapplied; but the sense of conflict, and the emotions to which it gives rise, are present in all sporting contests; the objectives of the novel and the film are the same as the objectives of the play, and man is not infinitely emotional nor (if he were) infinitely at leisure. It is possible for him to get drama to the point of his personal saturation without undergoing the trouble and expense of going to the theatre for it. A 'best-seller' from the library or a shilling seat in a kinema are cheap substitutes for the high and puissant emotions of the theatre, and by the time one has finished thinking of gramophones and radio, of winter evenings and the disinclination to turn out for anything else than dancing, of summer evenings and daylight-saving combined with the passions for golf and tennis, it becomes surprising that the theatre, unique instrument for arousing and satisfying emotion as it is, should retain its place secure among the varied counter-attractions of modern life.

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The theatre wins over the most gripping novel because reading is a private and playgoing a public pleasure. We are gregarious, and the pleasure we derive from the intervals between the acts in the theatre results from the evidence they afford us of a community with our fellow-men. That is not a quality peculiar to the theatre, but it is felt less in the darkened kinema or in the lighted concert-hall than during the intervals between the acts, when each fall of the curtain and each turning up of the house lights brings to an audience a fresh realization of itself as audience. Nothing is more wrong-headed than to write a play without a break, like *Getting Married*, and to ignore the human value of intervals. In practice, *Getting Married* is broken up, and its author's discovery that "the Greek form is inevitable when drama reaches a certain point in poetic and intellectual evolution" belongs to a future adumbrated, perhaps, in the bloodless Utopia of *Back to Methuselah*, but not likely to be reached by audiences of our time, who are unpoetic and unintellectual to the point of appreciating the social geniality of intervals.

But to speak first of intervals is to put the cart before the horse ; if they are not intervals between acts which have been worth listening to, they are more likely to be disgruntled periods when men wonder why they came to the theatre, and determine to resist feminine pressure to come again,

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than pleasant relaxations from emotional thrills. We go to the theatre, then, because drama in the theatre is drama in uniquely satisfying form ; the silent physical drama of sport or of the kinema and the second-hand drama of printed fiction dwindle to insignificance before the lure of the spoken word. The flesh-and-blood speaker of the audible word, the story told and the conflict fought, æsthetically, emotionally, humorously, by speaker against speaker—these are the compelling and essential attributes of the permanent theatre. If one were to subdivide the actor's accomplishments, placing them in order of importance, it is certain that the art of elocution must come first, because the primary magic of the theatre is the magic of the spoken word.

The serious theatre survives by deserving to survive, by becoming increasingly distinguishable from the lighter forms of entertainment, by not imitating in emptiness of content the deliberate plotlessness of musical comedy or the clever flippancy of revue, but by standing firmly to its first principle of the spoken word in association with dramatic action. Pantomime (wordless plays) and spectacle for the sake of spectacle are by-blows of the theatre ; they are actual perversities because they are traitors to the sovereignty of words. The efficiency of musical comedy and revue is welcomed because it is one of the motives which drives the upper theatre upward. That theatre lapses when

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it seeks, by spectacle or ballet, to borrow from the theatre of revue ; it encourages some of its numerous outside competitors when it discourages the spoken word and forgets that, of all its arts, the art of elocution is the first ; and some vehemence in re-asserting the importance of lines well written to be well spoken is not merely pardonable but urgent, lest drama become a lost wanderer in the wilderness of ' stagecraft.'

The advantages the theatre has over the kinema are the bodily presence and the spoken word of the actor ; the human voice, managed by an elocutionary artist, gives an exquisite and exciting pleasure beside which the most brilliant book is dull. But the actor's is an interpretative act. He is in the hands of the man behind, and if the quality of a play is poor and if the dialogue is uninspired the most beautiful and skilled speech will be of no avail. It is, therefore, of playwrights rather than of actors, of the unseen cause rather than the seen and heard effect, that one must chiefly write in celebrating and in criticizing the theatre of the twentieth century ; but (authors won't like to hear it) it is the actor and the actress, the visible and audible interpreters of the play, who are the cause of filled theatres. Out of sight, out of mind : that is the case with theatre audiences and writers of plays. The actor is seen and the actor is heard (the condemned fools who are not heard don't

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merit the name of actor), and people go to the theatre to see and to hear actors.

The natural predisposition to vanity of actors will, it is earnestly hoped, not be encouraged by these statements. On the contrary, to redress the balance, actors are the instruments of authors, and even audiences are not utterly unaware that plays have creators and vary in quality with the quality of their creators. Audiences are aware of Sir James Barrie, who draws them to the theatre as potently as Sir Gerald du Maurier himself. They are aware of Bernard Shaw, who is the author-idol of Repertory, and specialized audiences are responsive to some, but to very few, other authors. Nevertheless, since one hopes to go below the surface, authors must receive more attention than actors in any inquiry into the state of the theatre. Their work precedes the actor's; their work, if it is good, lives after the individual actor and after its creator himself. The spoken word must be a good word, and the art of elocution is first only of the *actor's* arts: before his art comes the art of the author. Besides, it happens that English plays of the twentieth century are, as plays, very much greater than English acting, as acting. A pretty controversy might be suggested by asking how many good plays have been let down by bad acting compared with the number of bad plays which have been saved by good acting. (It is probably



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fifty of the first to one of the second, but there shall be no dogmatizing about it.) The point is that these good words, which when well spoken are the salvation of the theatre, are supplied to actors by authors, and that if audiences are not inquisitive about causes they are sensitive to results.

With the exception of Barrie, Shaw, and Galsworthy, no author's name draws anything appreciable to the box-office. Mention to a hesitating playgoer that a play is by Monckton Hoffe or by Harold Brighouse or by Macdonald Hastings, and he will look blank and then ask brightly, "Who is in it?" No, people don't consciously go to the theatre because of authors; they are capable—people who have had no opportunity of meeting an actress in private life—of saying, "I do like Miss X. She's always so witty." Miss X takes them into the theatre, not Messrs A, B, and C, who write the witty lines she has spoken in their plays: that is the stock example of the sensitiveness of audiences to results and of their insensibility to causes. The man who photographed the film has his name thrown on the screen, the author of a play has his name on the programme, and audiences care as little about the one as about the other.

The sum is that the ear beats the eye in the theatre proper; in the other theatre (which shall

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not be called improper), in the theatre of light entertainment, the eye beats the ear. The advance of the serious theatre is due, first of all, to recognition of the importance of words. Why do people go to the theatre ? They go to hear speakers in acting plays.

## CHAPTER II

### *The Nineties*

**I**N practice it is unfortunately unsafe to trust the schools of elocution and to assume that the right words will be rightly spoken, but in theory competent elocution must be taken for granted, and leave must be taken here to concentrate upon the right words, making the admittedly large assumption that the right words will not be wronged by perverse intonations or by that black crime of the modern theatre, inaudibility.

The right words! If we knew them when we saw them in advance of production, in typescript, there would be no failures, but the play-words with which we are now dealing are not prospective, but past; they have been tested by production, they exist in the printed form, and what is here to be said about them may in some degree be matter of opinion, but is not matter of speculative opinion. But some things are beyond argument, and it is not to be questioned that since the Elizabethan outburst no such number of the right play-words has ever been written and spoken in England as during the pre-War years of the twentieth century.

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Decidedly we may differ about the individual merit of this play and of that, but as to the collective merit of the drama of this our great post-Elizabethan period there is no disputing. Was it too good to last? And will the fires, damped down by war, flame up again? Whither are we now going? These are questions to which one can only hazard answers after a full examination of the great period and after some brief survey of the causes contributing to its greatness.

One of the causes was that in the nineties there were men who knew what they wanted. There were Bernard Shaw, William Archer, J. T. Grein. It is cheap to say that all Shaw wanted was Shaw, and, even if it were true, he wanted well when he wanted the production of Shaw's plays. Archer was the translator-in-chief and the sedulous propagandist of Ibsen, and J. T. Grein stood with him for the general deinsularization of the English theatre. On the destructive side, Shaw's dramatic criticism was a weekly bombshell exploding in the camp of Sardouddledom and in the G.H.Q. of the actor-manager; on the constructive side, the three men here named were curiously linked together. In 1892 J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre produced at the Royalty the play *Widowers' Houses*, which Bernard Shaw began in collaboration with William Archer. The date has significance; it was not until the autumn of the following year that *The*

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*Second Mrs Tanqueray* was produced. Ibsen had been coming along since the production of *A Doll's House* in 1889; social and moral problems were in the air, and Arthur Pinero, until then a writer of farce and sentimental comedy, made a tremendous bid for leadership of the new movement by a play which brought forward in Mrs Patrick Campbell an actress of a wholly new type and startled the *bourgeoisie* by its subject. One's feeling is that Pinero failed by inches (or perhaps it was by years, by being for too long a Victorian) to become the leader of the advancing drama; after *Tanqueray*, the flood of problem plays about vulgar neurotics, the charming comedy of manners *Trelawny of the "Wells,"* the masterly piece of theatrical story-telling *His House in Order*, but never the onward step from *Tanqueray* to the drama of real people liberated from the trammels of stage-made situation. The great might-have-been that Sir Arthur Pinero is! And it was his to grasp; in those days Shaw was immature and struggling to get special performances of his first plays. Sir Arthur was, with *Tanqueray* and Mrs Campbell, crowding the St James's; the ball was at his feet, but Shaw kicked it, and was presently writing the plays which will be remembered when *Iris* and *Mrs Ebbsmith* and *Letty* are utterly forgotten, and when *Tanqueray* itself may survive only as a curiosity. Maybe, and maybe not; but the day of Sir Arthur

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Pinero was in the eighties (the day of his farces), or else it was the day of his derivative problem plays and of the delightful *Trelawny*; it was certainly not in the twentieth century. With him, Mr Henry Arthur Jones. *The Middleman* is great melodrama, *The Liars* a notable, four-square, up-standing comedy that puts some overpraised contemporary trivialities to shame. But the twentieth century counts Mr Jones out.

One is conscious of the brutality of saying that still living playwrights have been without effective influence on their time for more than twenty years. Better, with their great fellow of the nineties, Oscar Wilde, to have died? But decidedly not. *His House in Order* is there to answer in this century for Pinero, and *Mrs Dane's Defence* and the jolly comedy of *Dolly Reforming Herself* for Jones. And the virtual disappearance of their type of plays is due partly to the Three Musketeers of the nineties, Shaw, Archer, and Grein, but very much more to the facts, the social and political influences which made inevitable the revolt against the play well made as to shape but empty as to democratic significance.

It is not to be known whether the Fabian movement led Shaw to the theatre or whether Shaw led the Fabian movement there, but the Fabians in the theatre and the Stage Society on Sunday nights were the spearhead of a movement much wider

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than Fabianism or the specialized playgoing of the *intelligentsia*. It was the movement set up by the Education Act of 1870, fortified in its critical assaults upon the masterly remoteness from life of that normal theatre of the nineties by various Continental influences such as Ibsen, the coming to England of translations of the Russian novelists, the French school of realism, and the native English revolt—expressed in such differing forms as *The Yellow Book*, *Esther Waters*, the Employers' Liability Act, the Committee on Sweating, Mr John Burns and the dock strike of 1889, Aubrey Beardsley, the Wilde of *The Soul of Man*, Swinburne, George Gissing, and women riding bicycles—the revolt against the smug self-satisfaction of "All's right with the world," and the questioning of a social order which appears in the plays of the typical playwrights of the nineties to be unquestionable. In that attitude to life the theatre was an obstinate conservative; no wonder Shaw shocked them, no wonder that theatrical reactionaries (applauders of the theatre of the nineties still exist and still function in the Press) deplore the dramatic revolution which made the great age of modern British drama in the years between the Boer War and the Great War. For the nineties had extraordinarily much that was vivid, exuberant, and urgently alive. In retrospect it is difficult to use the phrase *fin de siècle*, to suggest weary men

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at the tired end of a century, about those years which saw the first books of Wells, Bennett, and Conrad. It was a time rather of bright beginnings than of dull endings, but the typical theatre hadn't noticed it; the typical theatre made Shaw its out-cast and kissed the feet of Pinero and Jones. The change to the theatre of the next century, to the epoch of the Court Theatre, must indeed have looked revolutionary to those who had refused to see it coming. The theatre which was definitely behind the times in the nineties sprang in the next ten years to leadership of thought, and while there were progressive movements in the theatre itself, to be seen by those with eyes to see, the typical theatre of that time buried its head so deeply in the sand as to be taken astonished by the new theatre when perforce it had to look at it because it was everywhere.

The excesses and the abuses of the actor-manager system, for instance, were not perceived by the complacents. That system has its uses, and the rarity of men of actor-manager quality is one of the calamities of our present theatrical day. One thinks of the heroic enterprise of producing Henry James's *Guy Domville*, of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and of *Paolo and Francesca*, and the actor-managership of the St James's by Sir George Alexander is seen to have had its exceptional merits. *Old Heidelberg*, *The Prisoner of Zenda*, and *If I were King*



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were sound contributions to the average romantic drama, and there was, of course, *The Second Mrs Tanqueray*. On the whole, that particular management pulled its weight, though one is bound to add that Alexander produced a number of plays devoid of any merit beyond that of containing an Alexander part. The Alexander part or the Wyndham part or the Waller part or the Tree part were the poison in that system. Good plays are not written by being made to exploit the mannerisms of an actor-manager. As a personal confession, one has surrendered utterly to the magic of Henry Irving, but it is hardly possible to write with patience of the havoc he wrought in the theatre by electing to appear (when not in Shakespeare) in tawdry melodrama or in singularly bathetic poetic plays. One understands Stevenson's vehement refusal to write a play for him ; one applauds that refusal because Irving deserved it. The apparent necessity, when writing a play in the nineties, to study the requirements of an actor-manager was one of the drama's stultifications ; Sir Arthur Pinero and Mr Henry Arthur Jones are not stupid men, and a possible reason why so many of their plays are downright stupid is to be found in the fact that they were studying the actor-manager, who often was a stupid man.

Oxford and Cambridge had taken to the stage, but the men and women of education and culture

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had not yet reached commanding positions; the rulers of the theatre knew all about the theatre and its traditions and very little about life outside the theatre, and it was precisely this life outside which pressed for expression inside and against which the actor-manager, in the main, banged the door. Wyndham was a terrible offender: but the past tense need not be used exclusively, because to-day, when the post-War theatre functions between the devil of the shopkeeper and the deep sea of the surviving actor-manager, it is those theatres associated with actor-manager control which have least to be proud of in the quality of the plays produced. The trouble is that the theatre needs either actor-managers or actors of actor-manager personality—actors who draw the public—and that the present-day actor-manager repeats the refusal of his predecessor to draw the public upward. Perhaps circumstance is too much for him, but this, as the old novelists used to say, is to anticipate. The birth of the great age is still the subject.

The quarrel was between people who wanted representations (they can be any kind of representation from melodrama to expressionism) of life in the theatre and people who regarded the theatre as a place in which to get away from life. The one sort wanted to see incredible people—for instance, dukes—on the stage, and the other sort wanted to see credible people—for instance, approximations

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to themselves—on the stage. Needless to say, the second faction won, and out of its victory came the New Drama. 1898 is a notable year, because in that year was published Shaw's *Plays Pleasant and Unpleasant*, with the fighting prefaces. In the same year (to break a butterfly on a wheel) was produced *The Ambassador*, by "John Oliver Hobbes." Let us look at the caste and the cast of this comedy. Mr George Alexander played Lord St Orbyn; there are two other lords and two knights, a princess, a duchess, and five ladyships. And *Mrs Warren's Profession* was published! Did that matter? Why, in 1900 "John Oliver Hobbes" was still working according to plan and provided Mr George Alexander with a Duke of St Asaph! The Society theatre was still busying itself with preposterous people like dukes; but the Society theatre was passing: the characters in plays were not much longer to be caste-barred from play-houses by the fact that they had no titles, and poor men were not much longer to be regarded solely as material for low comedy relief in popular melodramas.

The younger generation knocking at the door was not a generation of snobs. It didn't assume that aristocrats were the only people who mattered; it asked if they mattered at all; it decided, at any rate, that the stage aristocrat had had a good innings and that it was time to see if there wasn't

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some comedy, tragedy, and character to be perceived in the ordinary man. We haven't guillotined the aristocrats off the stage, but the New Drama has very nearly scaled down the proportion of titles on the stage to a reasonably lifelike limit. "The poor are God's people," said Meredith, and though his novels don't show that he made them distinctively his people (leaving that to Dickens and to Hardy), it is certain that the poor, rather than the titled and the secure, were the people of the New Drama. At last the theatre had got into contact with life, where, curiously enough, most people have neither titles nor security; and plays were being written about the people who went to see them.

## CHAPTER III

### *The Writing on the Wall*

MUCH could be made, but too much must not be made, of the idyllic economics of the theatre when the New Drama was in swaddling-clothes. In those days gross receipts of £800 a week led if not to ecstasy at least to contentment, while in these days gross receipts of £1500 a week are necessary to achieve the same result. Retrospectively considered, the New Drama rose in an economic paradise, but the same state of bliss and the same unconsciousness of that state surrounded all theatrical enterprise of that time. The post-War problem is the attracting of a minimum of £1500 a week to the box-office; the pre-War problem was the attracting of £800 a week; and while the drama in possession (derivatives of Dumas, like *Zenda*, *Beaucaire*, *If I were King*; derivatives of Ibsen, like *Tanqueray*, and so on; and derivatives of Robertson) easily reached and topped the essential £800, the attacking drama failed to attract that sum.

The drawing power of *Arms and the Man* at the old Avenue Theatre in 1894 is stated by Mr Shaw to have been £23 2s. 5d. per performance, or a

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total of £1777 5s. 6d. for a run from April 21st to July 7th, and probably Shaw's plays did not pay their way in *London* for another ten years, until the historic Vedrenne-Barker season of 1904-7.

Barrie paid in the nineties ; but he paid by not being the Barrie of *The Admirable Crichton*, by hardly hinting at the possibility of his becoming the Barrie of *Crichton*. *The Professor's Love Story* was a moderate success in 1895, and *The Little Minister* was a stunning success in 1897. But the latter was an adaptation of a novel ; it had character, comedy, and a sentiment which gave no greater evidence than did *Walker*, *London*, or *Jane Annie* that Barrie had it in him to state philosophy in terms of great drama. He hadn't come out of the kailyard, and there were, in fact, six lean Barrie years after *The Little Minister*, so that his masterpieces belong not to the nineties, but to this century. *The Admirable Crichton* in 1903 made that year as notable in the annals of the theatre as *The School for Scandal* made the year 1777 ; but *The School for Scandal* was a lonely peak and *Crichton* was a towering height among other heights, and there was hardly a year until the great period sung its appropriately named swan-song *Hobson's Choice*, and was then engulfed in the rising tide of the Colonial war-time theatre, which was not rubricated by the title of even one outstanding play.

No ; in the nineties, simple as the theatre's

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economic problems now seem to us, the new drama did not pay in London ; the old was crucified by Shaw, as dramatic critic of the *Saturday Review*, but, though bleeding, lived, and such raids in the theatre itself as that at the Avenue, when not only Shaw but W. B. Yeats was produced, were made possible only by the instrumentality of patronage.

The art of the theatre is not resentful of patronage ; perhaps a reasonable view of this matter is that the main body of the theatre should march under its own supply, but that the pioneers need not less but more patronage than they are receiving. Patrons *pour le bon motif* are apt to sow for others to reap, and intelligent patrons are rare not only because intelligence is rare, but because good motives also are rare. But patronage *pour le bon motif* was behind the Avenue productions of 1894, and if it is absurd to say that we owe Shaw and Yeats to Miss Horniman, or later, that we owe to her *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Hindle Wakes*, or that we owe to her Miss Sybil Thorndike and Mr Basil Dean, the fact remains that the effect of her individual patronage is pervasively felt in the theatre of to-day—a point to be elaborated later—and that if it is convenient to use one name more than another to symbolize the influence on the modern theatre of intelligent patronage that name is the name of Miss A. E. F. Horniman,

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who began to lose money gloriously in the theatre at the Avenue in the nineties.

About this time it began to dawn on English consciousness that there were other forces than Ibsen in Continental drama and other plays than Palais Royal farces. The adaptation of the *boulevard* play we have always had with us, and it is illuminating to find an American, Professor Phelps, writing of Capus, Donnay, Bataille, Lavedan, De Flers, and Caillavet that, "in comparison with the best British dramatists of to-day, they are like children playing with blocks in the same room with authors writing books." The modern Frenchmen are without influence in England. Brieux arrived in England because Shaw patronized him, and Rostand, a giant, wrote verse which both suffered in translation and made no breach in the modern British resolve to use prose drama as its medium of expression.

Maeterlinck had, indeed, some influence, D'Annunzio not much beyond the literary influence of the Arthur Symons translation of *Francesca da Rimini*, but the Germans Hauptmann and Sudermann, because they seemed on the whole out for much the same as the English school, were listened to and heeded. Except for *Magda*, that rather dreary play, they were listened to in print rather than on the stage; but Hauptmann's *Hannale* played a part in the development of the



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modern dream-play, and his *The Weavers* had something to say about realism. So had Tolstoy's *Powers of Darkness* and *Fruits of Culture* and Gorky's *The Lower Depths*. The influence of Tchekov is visible enough in the short stories of Katharine Mansfield and other moderns, but the influence of Tchekov's plays is not very palpable, even though Shaw calls *Heartbreak House* a "fantasia in the Russian manner." And the modern Italians and Spaniards are only just now reaching us, like the Czecho-Slovaks, *via* America.

On the whole, at the beginning of our period in the nineties the significant Continentals were being translated and printed rather than translated and acted, except at a few special performances in the afternoon or on Sunday nights. But the influence neither of the Sunday night (meaning at this time almost exclusively the Stage Society) nor of print is to be ignored. There was an outburst of good writing about the awakening theatre and growing critical impatience with the old—not so much from the professional critics, who largely took their lead from Clement Scott, as from writers in the reviews, who represented much better than the old professional critic the new demand for educated and lifelike drama. The printing of plays became a feature; tribute is due in this regard to the late William Heinemann, who set the example, followed later by others, among whom

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Messrs Duckworth and Messrs Sidgwick and Jackson were prominent, with the delectable "Repertory Series" of Gowans and Gray earning a special mark afterward. The standards of dramatic criticism were revolutionized not only in such organs as the *Saturday Review*, where a Max Beerbohm followed a G. B. S., but in the daily papers. The *Star* gave Mr Walkley leave to speak his mind, Mr E. F. Spence was urbane and devastating in the *Westminster Gazette*, and the crude zestfulness of Mr C. E. Montague in the *Manchester Guardian* set a new standard for the provinces and helped to create that provincial self-reliance which found expression in the Repertory theatres.

It resulted from this stir, for which the modern term is 'propaganda,' that serious literary artists began to change their minds about the theatre. They had thought of it as something 'inevitable' (to use Matthew Arnold's word), but contemptible; they thought of it as Mr Wells thought of it when he wrote *Kipps* and invented the playwright Chitterlow and his play *The Pestered Butterfly*—"much more legitimate than *The Wild Duck*"—with its *scène à faire* about a man with a beetle dropped down his back. Or else they yearned for the theatre as Henry James yearned and laboured massively but unsuccessfully to write a play—a strange failure in one who could write the dramatic dialogue of *The Turn of the Screw*. The construc-

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tion, the architectural qualities, and the plotfulness of Thomas Hardy's novels seemed to prove him a dramatist at will, but would he? No, he wrote *The Dynasts*, and *The Dynasts* is tremendous, but it isn't for the theatre. If it isn't the greatest closet-play in the world it makes a strong bid for that place, but a closet-play is a no-play, written for performance in the mind of the reader. The pity is that few stage-plays have so many right words as *The Dynasts*; the abridged, mangled version which *has* been produced on the stage proves how wonderful a stage-play Hardy might have written had he but cared! The case of Mr George Moore is different; the will to write for the stage seems to be there, and some constructive power is evident, but what is lacking is the gift (not, one imagines, to be acquired) of writing stage-dialogue. It is all very distinguished, but it doesn't speak. There were failures, like James and Mr Moore, among the triers, but the new phenomenon was that there were triers of quality at all and that an attitude of despair or simply of contempt toward the theatre as a medium of expression was passing. The first-rate minds of the day were no longer being revolted by, they were being attracted toward, the theatre whose 'inevitability,' they began to perceive, was not only for hacks but for artists. Behind them social democracy pressed for expression—the death of Dukedom rather than the

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celebration of dukes—and the exponents of the social drama were undergoing their apprenticeship. Mostly they did their prentice work in private. It was later that the Repertory Theatre gave us the edifying spectacle of young playwrights—Stanley Houghton is the example—doing their prentice work in public. The earlier men had not his advantage of being able to see their first plays publicly performed, though lately Mr Milne has certainly been allowed to use the public stage as his practice-ground. But the writing on the wall was faint to the end of the nineties. Shaw was visible, as a *coterie* playwright, and Barrie as the sentimentalist of *The Professor's Love Story* and as the Kailyarder of *The Little Minister*, but, generally, it was the darkest hour before the dawn, and he would have been a very sanguine prophet who could have foretold, out of the evidence in sight, such a dramatic renaissance as was about to come. There was, as we have seen, plenty of cause for a renaissance, but the accomplishment far transcended its causes. If the pendulum was bound to swing, it was certainly not bound to swing so high; it was not bound to give us, it was bountiful and amazing that it did give us, besides the mature Shaw and the mature Barrie, dramatists like Barker, Harkin, Masfield, Galsworthy, Synge, Houghton, Brighouse, and Chapin. An upward leap from the normal stuff of the nineties was inevitable—the

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alternative was the death of the theatre—but the mass and variety of the new drama made it a thing to marvel at. A single play, *The Silver Box*, by a till then unheard-of playwright caused astonishment, even in the midst of the astonishing Court Theatre season ; but those were comparatively early days, and the faculty of being astonished by good plays was blunted as good play succeeded good play. We can stand back a little to-day, we can see the whole outpouring of that time a little in perspective, and we can be astonished the more at this distance by the excellence and the diversity of the plays put forth by the galaxy of dramatists who belonged distinctively to the pre-War period of the twentieth century. Let there be no mistake about it : dramatically those were illustrious years.

## CHAPTER IV

### *The First Years: I. "The Admirable Crichton" and the Court Theatre*

IN the first years of this century British drama meant drama in London. There were pioneers like Miss Janet Achurch and Mr Harold V. Neilson, who stubbornly persisted in educating the English provinces up to an appreciation of *Candida*, *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, and even *The Admirable Bashville*; and in 1899 Mr Murray Carson had performed *The Devil's Disciple* at Kennington. It all counted, and it was all a little heroic, but (whatever may have been happening to Shaw's plays in America and in Germany) Bernard Shaw remained practically a dramatic outcast from London until 1907, and Barrie, with *The Admirable Crichton* in 1903, is the opener of the great period. It is convenient to say that pre-War twentieth-century drama began in 1903 with *The Admirable Crichton*, and ended, surviving into the War, with *Hobson's Choice* in 1916. The pre-War standards lasted so far into the War, just as the War standards outlasted the Armistice, and the two

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plays named definitely usher in and definitely close a period, historic already, of British drama.

*Quality Street* belongs to the same year, 1903, and its revival in 1921 gives furiously to think, too, of its quality when compared with the contemporary plays of 1921. The plays of this period *do* revive, with disturbing results to some valuations of present-day drama, and the plays of the nineties (*Tanqueray* is, perhaps, an exception, and so are the rule-breakers Barrie and Shaw) do not revive. Still, *Quality Street* is not more than charming; *The Admirable Crichton* is solid food from beginning to its original end, which, by some error of judgment, Barrie altered from a perfect irony to an imperfect sentimentality for the 1919 revival. That was an attempt to leave the audience satisfied at the end of *Crichton*, to soothe them against the very thought which it is the business of this play to arouse through exquisite emotion. May the first ending be restored, and may future revivals end to unsatisfied, thoughtful audiences, not to audiences made thought-free by a trick solution! There is no solution to *Crichton* so long as this civilization lasts—that is its tragedy; and its significance at the opening of this period was that here was a moving play, masterly in its mingling of fantasy and realism, its pitting of natural against civilized conditions, its technical balance between the delicately chosen word and the fastidiously invented ocular effect,

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which was supremely effective at once as a piece of the theatre and as social criticism. The thing which they doubted could be done was done ; the theatre was triumphantly demonstrated to be a place where the bases of our civilization could be discussed to full houses.

It is to be doubted if the significance of *Crichton* was perceived ; something of the fate of pioneers attaches itself to this play. It was successful, but Barrie has had larger successes with smaller plays. Perhaps that is to say that its significance *was* perceived and hated, and that its success was due to what it had in it flattering to the conventions of Society. It could have been written bitterly, defiantly, with a new last act completely carrying out the passing demobilization sentiment which Barrie half-heartedly acknowledged in the 1919 ending, and it would have gained as manifesto and lost as truth. It could have been an assault on the structure of Society, and it is ironic comedy which accepts that structure. The portent was that a dramatist who was not, like Shaw, an avowed rebel had dared in a West End theatre to raise questions about the organization of Society. Barrie did not offer any panacea in reply to the questions he raised ; he pointed to their existence, and, being a dramatist and not a propagandist, he left it at that. It is the smaller writers of the period, it is especially the women writers, who took the view that their



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business was not merely to state cases, but to propose remedies. Propaganda occurs with more discretion in Miss Hamilton's *Diana of Dobson's* than in her *Just to Get Married*, while Miss Robins' *Votes for Women* and Mrs Lyttleton's *Warp and Woof* are direct propaganda plays.

To write propaganda plays is to misread the lesson of *The Admirable Crichton*. Social criticism was doubtless a leading motive of the new drama ; because it was a drama which accurately reflected its times it could not help but be a social drama, and what there was of shrillness in its note of social criticism was due to its own bounding youth, to reaction from the obstinately uncritical drama which preceded it, and to the exuberance of its delight at finding the theatre open at last to the expression of social discontent. But it is to be emphasized that direct propaganda plays were exceptional, and that *The Silver Box*, *Strife*, and *Justice* are true children of *The Admirable Crichton* in that they raise questions about social problems and leave audiences to draw their own conclusions. Incidentally, one must not be taken as saying that the women playwrights were, in general, propagandists. There is no touch of propaganda in the greatest play by a woman of this time, *Rutherford and Son*, by Miss Githa Sowerby, nor in that exact and realistic statement of the city clerk's problem, *Chains*, by Miss Baker. The early and the late

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Shaw plays—*Widowers' Houses* and *Mrs Warren's Profession*, for instance, at one extreme, *Getting Married* and *Misalliance* and *Heartbreak House* at the other—have pretty definite propaganda in them, but of most of Shaw it is true to say that the cases are stated without propaganda in the plays and that the propaganda is kept for the prefaces. As to pessimism, which has been charged against Galsworthy, we hadn't an inkling of the dramatic meaning of the word until the Peace gave us something to be pessimistic about, and until that Peace-made piece *The Insect Play* was produced at the Regent Theatre. Perhaps that miracle of dramatic depression accurately reflects the spirit of its time; if so, "What a time!" is the only possible comment; and one's point is that in being social drama the plays of our period did exactly reflect the spirit of their time, which was not a depressed but a questioning time. The plays of the nineties refused, almost unanimously, to reflect the spirit of their time. *Tanqueray* made its effort and had its effect, but after that the theatre was made safe for the *bourgeoisie*, and people who were shocked by the books of Sarah Grand and George Egerton could go to the theatre in the sure certainty of having their faiths undisturbed. They didn't let their daughters go to *The Gay Lord Quex*, which may astonish us, but it was the garter that they denied their daughters a sight of—it was not the social

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problem raised by the marriage of an old *roué* to a young girl, because that problem is precisely not raised. We have had *Damaged Goods* since then, and we have seen more than garters on the legitimate stage without expiring of shock, and the realities of the new drama have given us an angle from which we don't view complacently, as a happy ending, the union of a 'gay' and elderly lord with a fresh young girl. That seems to us rather the starting-point of a tragedy than the comfortable end of a comedy: and, in fact, the new sort of play did develop a habit of beginning where the old sort left off.

The other point about Barrie's plays, which this time applies both to *Quality Street* and to *The Admirable Crichton*, is that they emphasize the importance of the right word. Since Wilde, words in the theatre had grown sloppy, because they were uncared for; if the words were theatrically effective they needn't be veracious or nicely chosen, and one suggests that this was, really, a result not of incapacity on the playwright's part, but of pure heedlessness. It is noteworthy, at any rate, that Sir Arthur Pinero, who made his people talk telegraphese in the nineties, has overhauled his dialogue and to-day gives his characters believable conversation.

Barrie, then, launched the New Drama chronologically, and, after him, the Court Theatre season established modern drama. The amusing paradox

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is that the Court Theatre season of modern drama began at the Lyric Theatre with Euripides made actable for the English by Gilbert Murray; it may have begun to begin when Mr Granville Barker produced *Two Gentlemen of Verona* for Mr J. H. Leigh at the Court, but Mr Barker's production of the *Hippolytus* was not only the first real cyc-opener to his quality as producer, but a true preliminary to the Court *matinées*, which, after beginning with *Candida*, went on to repeat the Lyric performances of the *Hippolytus*. *The Trojan Women* and the *Electra* in Gilbert Murray versions were done later on, and if, then, *The Trojan Women* hadn't the startling modernity—the topicality—it had when seen during the War, nobody will deny that Greek tragedy in Gilbert Murray translations is modern. These plays are enough by themselves (and they were not by themselves) to rebut the charge that modern drama eschews poetry. Gilbert Murray was not for pedants, but for Everyman, and the service he rendered to English-speaking readers was great, but greater still the service he did by making Greek tragedy at home on the English stage.

Partly the Court Theatre was the heir of the nineties—the gathering together of plays already written which the new spirit had evoked—and partly it was the cause of plays being written; but its main heritage was the mature Bernard Shaw in

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assured possession of his astonishing powers as a dramatist, and before he became too much assured. *John Bull's Other Island*, *Major Barbara*, *Man and Superman*, and *The Doctor's Dilemma* were all first produced at the Court, with revivals of *Candida*, *You Never Can Tell*, *The Philanderer*, and *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*. The Court was the Shaw Theatre, with intelligent interruptions. It is probable that two later plays by Shaw, *Fanny's First Play* and *Pygmalion*, have enjoyed more popularity than any of the Court plays, though *You Never Can Tell* must run them fairly closely ; but one feels that the Court had Shaw at his best, his most characteristically 'Shavian' period, with the three plays *John Bull's Other Island*, *Major Barbara*, and *Man and Superman*. All Shaw, of course, appeals more to the ear than to the eye, but never, not even in *Heartbreak House*, does the playwright in him forget the need for ocular shock-tactics. *Arms and the Man*, *Cæsar and Cleopatra*, *Androcles and the Lion*, and *The Devil's Disciple* make large and deliberate use of the pictorial ; in a play like *Major Barbara* the pictorial is subdued to a big drum, Salvation Army uniforms, and the setting of the last act ; and Shaw calls the whole affair " a discussion." Well, there have not been many acts written as dramatic as the second act of the 'discussion,' *Major Barbara*. It has been said that no great play exists without its discussion, and that the last act is the place for

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the discussion. Shaw certainly discusses, and ultra-modern impatience with words is capable of finding a something tedious in the last-act discussion of, for instance, *Major Barbara*. Shaw does ask a modern audience to leave its War neurosis at home and to extend itself a little in the exercise of using its ears ; he asks for an audience untired by tennis, and if they can't to-day savour the poetry of Keegan and the comedy of Broadbent and the passion of Major Barbara, then audiences have degenerated, and it is they and not the Shaw masterpieces that are less than they were. *Getting Married* does try an audience unreasonably severely ; *Man and Superman* does not.

It may be put that in about half his plays Shaw is Everyman's dramatist and that in the other half he is distinctively the dramatist of the man who listens. *Arms and the Man* is simply a well-made play ; it relies not on wit or mental gymnastics, but on a simple idea plus technique which seizes and holds attention. Later, Shaw took a higher opinion of his audiences ; he presumed that they would listen to the right words and he gave them the right words, occasionally breaking out of instead of being confined by the shape of his plays. He took liberties in the name of wit which his imitators take without reason. Shaw could do that because he is essentially a playwright and his liberties 'come off' ; he is not, as the old school tried to say, an

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iconoclast misusing the theatre for his own ends, but a dramatist to his finger-tips. His words are the right words, and the fair comment on that is that it is possible to have too much of a good thing; his ideas were irrepressible, and he permitted himself to express them in plays which already carried their full weight of ideas. The trouble resulting from this was not so much the trouble of Shaw, but of weaker men who hadn't his ideas, and who imagined that because Shaw's plays weren't always shapely therefore shapelessness made great plays. Shaw's plays are great, less some shapelessness; theirs were shapeless without greatness. Shaw happens to be first a great dramatist and second the boldest, most fruitful, most original thinker of our times; that is why stupid people do him the honour to regard him as a public nuisance. *Saint Joan* reasserts his greatness.

## CHAPTER V

### *The First Years : II. The Court Theatre*

THE typical British creators are the comic writers. Shakespeare was, perhaps, not greater when he was creating Falstaff than when he was creating Hamlet, but he was certainly functioning more in accordance with the normal English genius. "A right pithy comedy" is its first printer's description of *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, and "right pithy" is a good phrase for the Cockney characters of Bernard Shaw. They are in the living tradition of the great comic writers, of Sterne and Smollett, and of Dickens, who alone has a richer and more varied portrait gallery of Londoners than Shaw. Yet Shaw's Cockneys occur in less than a third of his plays! Burgess in *Candida*, Felix Drinkwater (of the "Worterloo Rowd") in *Captain Brassbound*, 'Enry Straker, Rummy Mitchens and Snobby Price, 'Liza Doolittle and her father! "Right pithy" indeed, and if none of them has the stature of Bill Crichton, that greatest Cockney of them all, it is certain that no



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dramatist since Ben Jonson has so diversely or divertingly reflected the London scene on the stage as Shaw. Which is, of course, merely one of his many strengths, and a result, quite possibly, of a minor preoccupation of his with dialect. His care for dialect is exhibited (besides in the dialogue) in the little disquisition on Cockney pronunciation in the opening stage directions of *Captain Brassbound's Conversion*, and, at fuller length, in the subject-matter of *Pygmalion*. It is open to anyone to object to the ideas in Shaw's plays—to think that they are wrong ideas or to think that there are too many ideas—but it is simply not open to think that Shaw hasn't a perfect feeling for, and a beautifully fastidious selection of, the right words. He 'speaks' to a miracle on the stage, and when the speaker is as right as the words he speaks—a Granville Barker as John Tanner or a Louis Calvert as Broadbent—the playgoer savours one of the keenest pleasures of the theatre.

Other of the Court dramatists had, if less genius, the same sedulous care for the right word. There were, as one has put it, intelligent interruptions to Shaw's hegemony at the Court, and there were a few interruptions which were less than intelligent. But the Court season, if it had found no new play except *The Silver Box*, would have justified itself. The plays of John Galsworthy are not *The Silver Box* and the rest; they are *The Silver Box*, *Strife*,

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*Justice*, and the rest ; and it is not by any means certain that *The Silver Box* is not the best of the three major works. In *Justice* either one of two acts marks time and is redundant ; there is the failure to perceive that the tragedy of Ruth Honeywill is better worth writing than the tragedy of Falder ; and there is less balance and more bias than in *Strife*. *The Silver Box* and *Strife* must fight it out for first place, and the fourth, the best of the minor Galsworthys, is undoubtedly *The Pigeon*. That was in 1912, and *The Mob* and *The Skin Game* and *Loyalties* have done nothing to shake *The Pigeon* from its fourth place, let alone enter into competition for any of the first three places. *Loyalties* is a good play, but *The Silver Box* and *Strife* are great plays, the one with the finer sense of character, the other with the grander sense of circumstance ; both without sex interest, the one with a charwoman for a heroine, the other with the ironic tragedy of the clash between capital and labour for its subject, challenging on every possible point the old theatre of the distortionists. A police-court case and a strike, not as details of melodrama, but as the material of serious drama unmingled with sex interest. It was hardly decent. It couldn't be done, except that, magnificently, it was done ; with the incidental *bravura* gesture that *The Silver Box*, Galsworthy's first produced play, is masterly in technique, with an attack which

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catches an audience immediately the curtain rises and never loses its initial drive. The new stuff was demonstrated to be in competent play-writing hands ; but that is not to say that it caused a box-office *furore*. It did not ; but it proved its existence, and the history of this time, after the Court Theatre, is the story of the old theatre's assimilating the new and of the new playwrights making advances toward the commercial theatre. But we have not yet finished with the Court dramatists.

The title of Barric's play being in one's mind, it is irresistible to call Granville Barker the admirable Crichton of the earlier years. As Shavian actor he was supreme—not even Louis Calvert matched the elocutionary zest with which Barker tackled Shaw's long speeches, and not even Forbes Robertson as Shaw's Cæsar equalled the intellectual poetry of Barker's Keegan. As producer he was the chief begetter of the naturalistic school of acting and, in the modern sense of the word, the first producer of consequence. As author in collaboration and as translator he would seem to side with the older theatre—that is where *Prunella* and *The Harlequinade* and *The Romantic Young Lady*, *Deburau* and even *The Anatol Dialogues* place him—but as original author he contributed a new and a strangely beautiful sense of intellectual, always intellectual, romance to the naturalistic play. Of the collaborations, one's personal wonder is that *Prunella* is so

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often revived, and *The Harlequinade*, which Barker wrote with Mr Dion Clayton Calthrop, not revived at all ; but both are charming fantasies, and *Prunella* is one of the few contributions to the large dramatic literature of Pierrot which have real distinction. One can't divide each author's share in a collaboration, but *The Harlequinade* exists with *Prunella* to prove that the man who wrote *Waste* is not disdainful of the theatre as fairyland.

Family drama did not begin with Barker's Court Theatre play, *The Voysey Inheritance*, but, from that tremendous modern buccaneer, old Voysey, to the least significant of his family, these are real people caught in a situation which Meredith might have invented. Certainly Barker, like Shaw, demands an audience of listeners, but in *The Voysey Inheritance* too much is just not asked of them ; in *Waste* too much *is* asked. This, for instance, is a question asked in *Waste* by Trebell : " How positive a pedagogue would you be if you had to prove your cases and justify your creed every century or so to the pupils who had learnt just a little more than you could teach them ? " Does it speak ? At any rate it does not speak easily, and there is doubly the obligation not to be dull on a dramatist when he chooses an ' unpleasant ' subject. The subject of *Waste* was well chosen, but the treatment grew tedious. *The Madras House*, surprisingly for any play from a man who was first an actor, reads

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better than it acts. Galsworthy, we said, is not the author of *The Silver Box* and the rest ; Barker, as single-handed dramatist, is the author of *The Voysey Inheritance* and the rest, though of the rest *The Madras House* is a sizable achievement in which the characteristic note of intellectual romance is effectually sustained. It has been said that *The Voysey Inheritance* dates. One doubts it. Announce it as "A Comedy of Reparations" and it might seem almost painfully opportune—with its question-mark of an ending.

A play was done at the Court called *The Reformer*, by Mr Cyril Harcourt. It was the least 'reformed' of all the Court plays, and was chosen, no doubt, to be an antidote to John Masefield's grim short play, with which it was produced, *The Campden Wonder*. Both plays were outclassed by the average Court play, but *The Campden Wonder* is interesting if only because it joined up Masefield with the new movement. In so far as that movement was social drama, Masefield did not belong with it ; but neither did Maurice Hewlett's 'pastoral' play, *Pan and the Young Shepherd*, nor W. B. Yeats' *The Pot of Broth*, both of which were also produced at the Court.

Masefield's *Nan* came afterward, and *Nan* contains the second greatest love-scene in the drama of those days, the greatest being the scene in *The Playboy of the Western World*. *The Campden*

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*Wonder* has little significance ; it could only have occurred either to an over-sophisticated Grand Guignol author or to a peasant-artist to have written that play, and what significance it has is that it places Masefield the playwright where one feels the ballads again placed him later on, as a peasant-artist. *Nan* has triumphant beauty ; in *Pompey the Great* and *Mellony Holtspur* the beauty is intermittent, and *The Faithful* is better than these because Masefield's reaction to what he conceived to be the Japanese spirit has affinity with his authentic reaction to the spirit of the Somerset peasantry. But *Nan* is Masefield's unique claim to high dramatic renown ; a passionate tragedy, full of action for the eye, beautiful in words for the ear ; by *Nan*, by the character of Nan herself, by the rustic Don Juan, Dick Gurvil, by Gaffer Pearce and the harshly contrasted Mrs Pargetter, by the magic cadences of the first-act love-scene, and by the profound passion of the whole moving play, Masefield does indeed hold securely a place among the great dramatists of a great and fertile time. No actor ever failed as Hamlet ? Certainly no actress ever failed as Nan.

Finally (of the Court dramatists) there was St John Hankin, writer of comedy and master of dialogue, whose best play, *The Return of the Prodigal*, was produced at the Court. Hankin was a stylist, and gave us in this play, besides that sort

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of good talk which is real talk, plus imagination, a real as opposed to the romantic ne'er-do-well. It is, besides that, and like *The Voysey Inheritance*, a family play; the fourth-act scene between the Prodigal and his unmarried stay-at-home sister is a little gem of unforced emotion, a light but all-sufficing exposition in a few words of the tragedy of the unwanted woman. Hankin had the trick of diving lightly to the depths, of showing tragedy through comedy. But he suffered from plotlessness. *The Charity that Began at Home* is thin stuff, and character, by itself, won't make a play even when exhibited in brilliant dialogue; there is need for something solid about which character can be characteristic. There is more intensity, but there is not quite passion, in *The Last of the De Mullins*, but the conclusion is inescapable about Hankin that he wasn't a native of the theatre; he said astute things in good stage-dialogue, but his plays did not act as well as they spoke; his sense of the stage was fallible. He reads delectably, but to see him is to set oneself asking why he couldn't have collaborated with some dull fellow who happened to know how to make an acting play. It is, curiously, his least original and most conventional play, *The Cassilis Engagement*, which acts the smoothest, but one can forgive more than a few flaws for the dialogue and the character of *The Return of the Prodigal*, and if it is the least of the major Court

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plays it shall be allowed its place along with (to recapitulate) the Gilbert Murray Euripides plays, *John Bull's Other Island*, *Man and Superman*, *Major Barbara*, *The Silver Box*, *The Voysey Inheritance*, and *Prunella*. It should be added that the Court did a play each by Ibsen, Maeterlinck, Hauptmann, and Schnitzler ; but we are dealing here with the English renaissance.

In those years of 1904-7 the Court had almost a monopoly of the great plays, but not quite, and the exception was the momentous one of *Peter Pan* in 1904. When Charles Lamb said that a man who refused apple dumplings couldn't have a pure mind, he stated the case for *Peter Pan*—which is not a comparison of that play with a dumpling, except on the ground that both are universal. It is not only the finest flower of the children's theatre—the notion that there ought to be a children's theatre at all belongs to this time—but, in the form of a masterly play and not in the formlessness of disjointed pictures, it is an almost uncannily profound exploration of the mind of a child. It is objective, with its skilled use of the visual resources of the stage, and it is also subjective in its imaginative beauty and its underlying profundity. *Peter Pan* himself is a real person for us all, as definitely established as Gulliver or Robinson Crusoe or Alice. One remembers the suggestion of some enthusiast during the Court Theatre season that Granville



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Barker ought to be celebrated by his statue in Sloane Square, and it is possible to smile at that suggestion. We don't smile at any incongruity in the statue of Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens; we couldn't wait till Peter Pan was dead; he won't die, and he joins Bill Crichton as Barrie's chief contributions to the creations of the early years. Shaw has the larger gallery and the wider intellectual scope, but he has no individual creations of the stature of Bill Crichton and Peter Pan.

## CHAPTER VI

### *John Brown's Soul*

THE Court Theatre was not a financial success, except that the fact that it made nobody bankrupt may be regarded as a very great success for a three years' season of serious drama. But the partners, after working about sixteen hours a day for three years, closed the partnership and took out about £1500 each, which is not success as the theatrical speculator regards that word, and (considering the odds against him) has every right to regard it.

And if John Brown's body lay a-mouldering in the grave, his soul went marching on. What happened when the Court Theatre closed was the decentralization of serious drama and not its extinction. In London the aftermath of the Court was to be seen in the Kingsway management of Miss Lena Ashwell, in the Frohman Repertory season at the Duke of York's, in Granville Barker's managements, in the Vedrenne-Eadie Royalty Theatre management, in the Little Theatre management of Miss Gertrude Kingston followed by Mr Barker; generally by the peaceful penetration of the new

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movement into the theatre at large, and particularly by the new phenomenon of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and the Repertory movement in the English provinces.

Some of these enterprises were Court Theatre and water—the new movement compromising with the old, and the old asking itself if the new could not be made to pay. Apart from Barrie, it hadn't produced money for the theatre, but it had made a serious breach in the money-producing potentiality of the old drama. Sentimental melodrama, for instance, had become no easy proposition. Since the old Adelphi days melodrama had been dressing itself in fine clothes, and the fine clothes of *The Sign of the Cross* had helped, with its religious motive, to make that play a tremendous success. But by the time of *The Eternal City* religious motive and fine clothes and His Majesty's Theatre were among them all inadequate to conceal the decline in the demand for melodrama, and even the least sophisticated public was seen to have acquired a new impatience with absurdity in the theatre. Shaw hadn't laboured in vain, and the die-hards of the old period were anxiously asking themselves what was to be done about it; the reply, obviously, was that they had better try some of these strange new plays which didn't give an actor-manager a fair chance of displaying his mannerisms.

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In the classic case of the young lady of Riga who went for a ride on a tiger there was no room for doubt as to which had swallowed the other ; and it might certainly seem, when both the Haymarket and His Majesty's Theatre surrendered to Bernard Shaw, that the new drama had swallowed the old ; but it has hardly done that. There was give and take, and there were adjustments on both sides, but the balance, up to the time of the War-theatre, was certainly on the side of the new movement ; then the pay of the colonial soldier effected the great reaction, from which we are only to-day emerging.

One of the less happy adjustments is to be instanced in the case of Hubert Henry Davies. The production in 1903 of *Cousin Kate* gave legitimate grounds for the hope that a new writer of comedy had arisen, but the actor-manager, either in the person of Sir Charles Wyndham, or the system of the actor-manager in general, captured Davies, who degenerated under the influence of the Star-who-must-be-served to the level of *Captain Drew on Leave* and *Mrs Epping's Law Suit*. Nothing so good as *Cousin Kate* succeeded that play, and Davies figures in one's compassionate regard as a victim of the actor-manager, always on the brink of first-rate comedy and never writing it. *The Mollusc* is a technical feat, not only in its economy of characters, but in its nice adjustment of the two chief parts to Charles Wyndham and Mary Moore. With them,

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it was delightful ; without them, it is a thin little comedy. To use a word of the films, Davies was 'vamped' by the actor-manager, and the point of him for our argument is that he illustrates the actor-managers' recognition of the necessity to adapt himself to the new spirit. Davies belonged with the new movement by virtue of his dialogue and his abhorrence of distortion ; he belonged sufficiently with the old to make him easy prey. They say he died dissatisfied with his work, and, looking back, one feels he had it in him to write notable comedy. He surrendered, instead, to an actor-manager.

From another point of view Davies was of great value to the theatre ; from the same point of view Mr Sutro and Mr Maugham are of great value. Theatres have to be kept open so that when works of theatrical art come along there shall be theatres in being to receive them. Professor Lyon Phelps says, with cruel candour, " An astonishingly successful dramatist like Somerset Maugham, for example, has had no influence at all ; modern dramatic history would be the same if he had never written a play. In art it is always quality, not quantity, that counts." True, but a quantity of successful plays which may be less than art count very much in the important matter of keeping the theatres open : and whatever is to be thought of Mr Sutro's plays and Mr Maugham's, they are purged of the

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sort of dialogue which made so much of the stuff of the nineties offensive to the ear. If they don't make dramatic history, they don't bring the theatre into contempt. Mr Sutro and Mr Maugham, beginning with *The Walls of Jericho* and with *Lady Frederick*, began, at least, respectably ; with *The Choice* and *The Circle* they are still of respectable quality, still keeping theatres open, still void of offence to the moderately fastidious ear, and proving in those two late plays of each that they have not fallen away from their early standards, but have bettered them. They are not 'new movement' men, but neither have they been insusceptible to the influences of their time ; they represent the old theatre—chastened by the new.

The Kingsway management of Miss Lena Ashwell was an earnest but timid offspring of the Court ; it was earnest because it produced *Irene Wycherley* and timid because it refused *Strife* ; it lived on *Diana of Dobson's* and died when the momentum of that hybrid play, that compromise of old with new spirit, passed away. It chose plays, after that, with better intentions than success, and *Strife* was not the only play of great merit which it deemed too audacious. And *Strife*, like *Nan*, got its production, though both were after the Court period. The soul was marching on.

It marched, amazingly, into the camp of Charles Frohman ; yet was that so amazing of Barrie's

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manager ? When Frohman was not ‘presenting’ Barrie at the Duke of York’s some rather trivial things happened at that theatre, but the tremendous happening of *Peter Pan* had been followed, in 1908, by *What Every Woman Knows* (has it the greatest first act in modern drama or does Lancashire beat Scotland with the first acts of *Hindle Wakes* and *Hobson’s Choice* ?) ; and Frohman may have seen cause for acting on the principle “the greater the play the greater the results”—which is a sound principle if one can take a long view of results. To capture Frohman was, decidedly, a score for the New Drama, but Frohman omitted to capture Granville Barker for the production of the New Drama at the Duke of York’s. He only captured *The Madras House*.

The culminating ill-luck of the season was the death of King Edward ; but somehow, somewhere, there hung about the whole enterprise sufficient of the spirit of the old theatre, actively antagonistic to the new, to have made its failure certain even before the King died and London went into mourning. *Chains*, for example, was produced as if that realistic comedy of the City clerk’s tragedy were a George Alexander Society play. The values of the staging were all wrong ; the struggling people of the play had £1000 a year incomes on the stage. Somebody must have mentioned the word ‘sordid,’ and somebody else was desperately

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anxious lest a play at the Duke of York's should appear to be 'sordid.' *Chains* is not sordid, but neither is it Society drama; it demanded the idiom of producing and the idiom of naturalistic acting acclimatized at the Court Theatre, and neither were allowed to be at home at the Duke of York's, with the result that, as to acting, the revival of *Trelawny of the "Wells"* was easily the best achievement of the season. *Trelawny* is delightful, but it makes no pretence to be of the modern school. It is a picture of the manners, especially the stage manners, of the early sixties; it was first produced in '98, and may be added to the list of the few plays of the nineties which stand revival; but a management which succeeded with *Trelawny* was temperamentally unlikely to succeed with *Chains*, a great play which has not yet (it will) recovered from the injustice done it by its snobbish first production.

Nor did Frohman catch Galsworthy at the top of his best form. There was courage in producing *Justice*, and *Justice*, as a tract, did its business so effectively that Churchill as Home Secretary paid attention to its message. *Justice* is a great play, in spite of the propaganda, in spite of one's feeling that either the court scene or the prison scenes could be cut out of it, in spite of its being a quarry out of which the still more poignant tragedy of Ruth Honeywill could have been got. We are not told about a convict; we are made to appreciate



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what it feels to be a convict. A tract, but what a tract! Only by the tract in it does it rank below *Strife* and *The Silver Box*. The 'movement' had by no means burnt itself out, but, between the closing of the Court and the organizing of the Frohman Repertory, plays of absolutely first rank had not accumulated. With *Chains* and with *Justice* the Duke of York's touched greatness; by them and by *The Madras House* it evidenced courage, but it hadn't the luck of the Court, and some hesitation in the direction, some measure of failure to evoke acting of the precise type needed by its naturalistic plays, combined, with the death of the King, to wreck Frohman's resolute effort to make liaison with the new movement. The effort was, as far as the plays were concerned, without compromise: in taking *Chains* and *Justice* and *The Madras House* Frohman held out his hand without reserve, and it would almost appear, after that, that the New Drama decided to make a gesture in return.

What, at any rate, is plain is that, with a few exceptions, the New Drama elected for comedy: it decided that, if it had a 'message,' that message would reach the greatest number of playgoers by entertaining them. The word 'entertainment' has its dangers. *Strife* is an entertainment and so is *Tons of Money*, but they don't entertain in the same way or on the same terms. Then the new

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decision was to entertain on rather easier terms, and the result of that decision (consciously or unconsciously made) was seen when Galsworthy wrote *The Pigeon* and when Shaw wrote *Fanny's First Play* and *Pygmalion*. Galsworthy's *The Fugitive* occurs to one as a deliberate attempt to enter the commercial theatre after a study of Mr Sutro's methods. That is the impression given, rightly or wrongly, by *The Fugitive*, which is a failure from the point of view both of art and of keeping theatres open.

If there was a new move at this point it was very much to the good. The charge of intellectual arrogance shall not be made by the present writer against the Court dramatists, but it has been made. Let our definition of an idealist as one who takes too high a view of human nature be remembered. Possibly the new dramatists came to the conclusion that they had been idealistic about audiences and that some concession would not damage their art, and would, on the contrary, rescue their plays from *coterie* playhouses. Further, the return to comedy was a return to the living English tradition. Shaw had never departed from that tradition, nor did Hankin; they are both, in their degree, comic writers who entertain us in the theatre. But we had to listen hard in order to be entertained by some of the Shaw plays, and we had to listen exceptionally hard to Hankin. In future, moderate

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listeners were to be provided for, not alone by the established playwrights of the New Drama, but by other writers who were seized by the possibilities of the theatre. Mr Arnold Bennett, for example, aimed at the moderate listener ; he never asked an audience to screw itself up to the old Court pitch ; and it was definitely a gain to the New Movement that it abandoned aloofness, that it ceased to give excuse for the sentiment that it was ‘above their heads.’ It made, even, some extreme gestures at one time or another. Shaw wrote *Press-cuttings* ; Barrie wrote a revue for Gaby Deslys ; Barker produced a musical comedy ; and none of these were good work, but rather feverish symptoms of the new men’s anxiety to show that the movement was Everyman’s Movement. It was and it is Everyman’s Movement, but its leaders merely cut capers in the theatre of light entertainment, and incapable capers at that. ‘The theatres are two and disparate, and the entertainment and the entertainers of the one are different in kind from the entertainment and the entertainers of the other.

## CHAPTER VII

### *One Theatre and the Other*

THE yeast of the provinces began to stir in the London loaf, but let us go on for a while as if the London tyranny of dramatic art had never been seriously challenged by the creative provinces. Yet it is a provincial who steps upon the London scene and looks for a while as if he was to rank with the greatest dramatists of the time—and then, inexplicably, fades. The staying power of Mr Sutro and Mr Maugham has been instanced; Shaw stayed, and Barrie. Mr Arnold Bennett has not stayed, and in searching for a reason one finds it partly in Mr Bennett's imperfect submission to the discipline of the theatre's technique and partly in his voluntary relinquishment of what was, as playwright, his great advantage—his provincialism. Did he pay heed to a phrase of that impenitent metropolitan, Mr Walkley, about "pottering round the Potteries"? Then Mr Walkley damaged a dramatist, and the play which potters to the Potteries, *What the Public Wants*, is Mr Bennett's best single-handed play, inferior only to the collaboration with Mr Knoblock,

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*Milestones.* There was notable union between the old theatre and the new when Sir Charles (then Mr) Hawtrey took up *What the Public Wants* after a Stage Society production and produced it at the Royalty Theatre.

The Royalty was shortly to be the home, under Mr J. E. Vedrenne and Mr Dennis Eadie, of a solid and workmanlike attempt to combine the old spirit with the new, and because the bias was toward the new the management had a long career of success. Mr Bennett and Mr Knoblock were its dramatic pillars, with a good play by Mr H. M. Harwood which wasn't quite good enough to follow *Milestones* successfully; with a throw-back to Mr Vedrenne's Court Theatre days in the production of Galsworthy's *The Pigeon*; and with a reaching forward after new authors manifested by the production of *The New Sin* by Macdonald Hastings and *The Odd Man Out* by Harold Brighouse. One wouldn't say of any idea that it is absolutely new: but the three-generations basis of *Milestones* seems, then, to have been as new as anything can be; there was newness in the use of the dream-play in Mr Knoblock's *My Lady's Dress*, and there was newness in the simplicity with which both these plays were produced. Mr Bennett's *The Honeymoon*, with Miss Marie Tempest, and, much later, his *The Title*, were slighter things, but they serve to emphasize the new note

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of the New Drama—that it had turned to comedy. The Royalty was a comedy theatre.

Mr Wells once wrote a pamphlet called “Boots” on the theme of the unhappiness which the broken, leaking boots of other people caused him and ought to cause any who have a social conscience. The Wellwyn of *The Pigeon* is a perceiver of boots; he can't be happy while other people are in distress. *The Pigeon* is the comedy of charity, with the characters unusually individualized for Galsworthy—unusually, that is, not the creatures of circumstance, and with the whole suffused by a rare sense of beauty. A temporarily dwindled Galsworthy was represented much later at the Royalty by *The Foundations*.

Meantime, if good plays were not multiplying like the men in buckram, there was a heartening improvement in the quality of what may be called the average play, and some of them went well above the average. A balance between the eager new ideas and the massive, permanent, slow-to-absorb but (because living) receptive old theatre seemed to be struck by *Rutherford and Son*, *Milestones*, *The Great Adventure*, *Pygmalion*, and *Fanny's First Play*, to which may be added, with reserve, Mr Eden Phillpotts' *The Secret Woman*. London did not particularly love *Rutherford and Son*; Londoners love London plays (the other four first named, successes all, are London plays), and unless

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there is something quaint and sentimental about a play with a provincial setting (e.g., *Bunty Pulls the Strings*), it starts life in London handicapped. There is an old gibe that London is provincial; perhaps this is less justified than it was, and there have been theatrical seasons when London has seemed to be American. But London makes things difficult for the serious play about the provinces. It is London's loss, but one of the misfortunes of the time is that a provincial who seemed strong enough to oppose great provincial plays to the London tyranny, and thus to break it down, preferred to run away from *Cupid and Common Sense* and *What the Public Wants* to *Milestones* and *The Great Adventure*—London plays in themselves very emphatically worth while, but not the plays which Mr Bennett might have written and by which he might have lowered the barrier of prejudice which London puts up against such a play as *Rutherford and Son*. The Cockney play which fails in London must be egregiously bad, but the provincial play which succeeds must be exceptionally good.

The theatre which one has just called receptive was all this time receiving something else, to which the general name of the 'new stagecraft' may be given. It is not generally known that Germany tried to win the War by softening the brains of the British with *Chu Chin Chow*. But Reinhardt

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produced *Sumurun*; *Sumurun* begat *Kismet*, and *Kismet* begat *Chu Chin Chow*. These statements reek with falsity, yet have, seriously, something of the truth in them. *Sumurun*, an oriental pantomime, set up a wave of stage orientalism and decoratordom to which there is no objection in the *other* theatre, but many objections in the theatre where words are of paramount importance. Reinhardt, of course, was not the originator of 'stagecraft.' Gordon Craig was, long ago, a practical producer, testing on the stage the theories he has since developed in design after design and in book after book; and Granville Barker fell temporary victim to the decorators and produced Shakespeare with words; certainly with words, because he drove his team of actors to speaking at a splendid pace and saw to it that Shakespeare was neither mangled nor unheard; but of what avail to rescue Shakespeare's words from the old 'acting versions' when their audibility was cancelled by gilt-faced fairies and other eye-blows of equal distracting power? Happily Barker did not stay long in the camp of the decorators; he came back, where he belonged, to the theatre of words as the producer of *Fanny's First Play* and as the London producer (the first production was in other hands at the Glasgow Repertory) of *The Great Adventure*.

The right place for *Sumurun* was the music-halls; when the theatre receives 'decorations,'



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except in the most limited doses, it has indigestion. 'Decoration' impedes words and diminishes actors. That is one of the reasons why alliance between the theatre and the musical-comedy theatre is to be deprecated. In musical comedy 'decoration' is right; it is necessary because there are no words worth hearing and the eye has to be pleased lest the audience discover that the ear is being cheated.

When (as happens sometimes) the theatre of light entertainment has good words, what becomes of decoration? Not being needed, it disappears. It will hardly be contested that the best words in the modern theatre of light entertainment—that is, since Gilbert—were those of *The Follies*. The only revues that are worth a tinker's curse are the small-theatre revues, and their father was Pellissier. In the small-theatre revue wit in words comes first, wit in scenery and gadgets comes second, and the ponderous stage-effect comes nowhere. What need of decoration have *The Co-Optimists*? They have stripped light entertainment bare of even such trappings as have developed (there has been inclination to over-develop) in the André Charlot small-theatre revues, and they have gone back to Pellissier. It is wrong words which need 'decoration' (*i.e.*, compensation for their badness), not right words; and the success, after small expenditure on scenery, of *The Follies*, *Bubbly*, *A to Z*, the Vaudeville revues, and *The Co-Optimists* ought

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to have proved to our circus kings of the light theatre that they were backing the wrong horse.

All this would be outside our subject but that it proves the first importance of the right words, spoken or sung by the right people, in the light theatre as well as in the legitimate. It may be true that in huge playhouses, like the Hippodrome, any delicacy of effect, either in words or in staging, is unattainable. Then such theatres are the right places for decoration, and the Hippodrome has, in fact, done some notable things of late in decoration, but the extraordinary technique of a George Robey is needed to make words of use in that playhouse. Generally, music and spectacle supplant words in the large theatres of light entertainment, but the point made above about *The Follies* and *The Co-Optimists* modifies what was said in our first chapter—that the eye beats the ear on the lighter stage. That is not invariably true; nor is it, commercially, invariably profitable to bank on spectacle. Having regard to outlay, *The Follies* and *The Co-Optimists* must be among the stunningly profitable stage ventures.

There was virtual recognition of the dualism of the theatre up to the War period. There were 'legitimate' managements and musical-comedy managements; and the music-halls *were* the music-halls, where clever people developed a strength of technique which enabled them to hold an audience

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single-handed in front of any old back-cloth. When the spectacular revue was evolved it was found that the only actors capable of 'getting words over' in defiance of the spectacle were the music-hall comedians, like George Robey and Billy Merson; and there ceased to be any clear line of demarcation between the halls and the light theatre: but there was still a distinction drawn between the legitimate and the other theatre. His Majesty's had not condescended to *Chu Chin Chow*.

The late George Edwardes did, once or twice, produce comedy, but he let it be understood that he was an excursionist for the occasion; he stuck to his musical comedy last, and, looking back, one feels that words were considered by George Edwardes to be of some importance in musical comedy. *The Geisha*, *The Greek Slave*, *San Toy*, *The Duchess of Dantzic*, had some notion of plot; and so had Mr Courtneidge's production, *The Arcadians*, which, really, was the last of the English musical comedies. The writers did not decide upon a setting—Japan, China, and so on—and write spasmodic libretto to scenery; if their story was like the baby in Captain Marryat's novel, "only a little one," they nevertheless had a tale to tell. The admitted superiority of the Viennese composer brought in another kind of tale which was both thinner and—thicker. But the salient point is that musical comedy steadily declined in

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the years of the uprising serious drama ; and the subsequent disaster was due, at any rate in part, to the fact that just when the words of the light stage were at a peculiarly low standard, the musical-comedy managements ceased to be rigorously divided from the legitimate managements, and brought with their power of the purse to the legitimate theatre their contempt for words and their idolatry of spectacle. American musical comedy, in the example first of *The Belle of New York*, is understood to have brought a new standard of physical liveliness to the chorus-girl. One isn't sure if haughty languor was her characteristic before then ; one is sure that a good many American musical comedies were imported and that they set a new standard in imbecility of words. Small wonder that managers accustomed to such drivel proved disastrous filibusters in the legitimate theatre.

“What,” asks one of the characters in Barker's *Waste*, “is the prose for God ? ” “That,” replies another, “is what we irreligious men are giving our lives to discover.” There were dramatists at this time—Barker was one of them—giving their lives up to the discovery of the prose for God, trying to interpret God in terms of drama. The musical-comedy manager may be a religious man, but as a manager he isn't interested in “the prose for God,” but in the appetites of the man of the

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world. The 'irreligious' Mr Shaw wrote *The Showing-up of Blanco Posnet*—which may conveniently be contrasted with *The Merry Widow*; and there is room for both forms of entertainment, but they don't mix. Gentlemen who aimed to be William Whiteleys of the theatre were in evidence before the War, in full career during the War, and in bankruptcy after it; but the devastated area is the easier to reconstruct because of the demonstration given that the two sorts of theatre cannot be controlled by the same men. The different sorts of entertainment require different sorts of mind, and the musical-comedy mind was the victim of the curious slogan "A play is not a play when it is literary." It was, naturally, the musical-comedy mind which listened to the decorator. Words, it thought, are not necessary; words are literature, and literature isn't drama; therefore decoration is drama. Something like that was the lunatic syllogism of these mad logicians; and words, if permitted at all, must be subjected to the tyranny of the flapper-public; it was thought that there was no public but the flapper-public.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *Queen Horniman*

THE Repertory movement in the English provinces failed to beat the clock; its strength was discounted before the War by some weaknesses and some disasters, like the deaths of J. M. Synge and Stanley Houghton, but it was the War which caught Repertory and overwhelmed it with its job half done. Repertory survives intact at Liverpool, but where, when they are not dead, are the actors and the authors of the Repertory movement? They are in London. That is the tragedy of Repertory; it challenged, on its own provincial basis, the tyranny of London, and then succumbed to the War before it had had time to make its challenge good.

The movement was provincial; it was the reaction of the provinces to the Court Theatre on the one hand, and to the new, middle-class, astutely managed music-hall on the other hand. The provincial theatre managers were not astute; they failed to respond to the new demand for comfortable entertainment at cheap prices, and if playgoers were content with the hard benches of the theatre-pits when the attraction was exceptional, they were not

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content when the attraction was average. They preferred the cheap, booked, tip-up seat of the twice-nightly music-hall, or the equally comfortable seat of the kinema to the comfortless theatre seat. Possibly they preferred the entertainment provided by the music-hall ; but, if so, they were driven to prefer it by the utterly short-sighted exploitation of the theatrical touring system which gave them second-rate to tenth-rate imitations of the London casts of plays. These plays, often enough, were actor-manager plays. Consider, for example, *The Mollusc*, without Sir Charles Wyndham and Miss Mary Moore ! Yet such plays, lacking that very factor which was their cause, were toured as ‘London successes.’ Some of them had indeed been truly London successes : others had not even made a show of success, and others again had deliberately lost money in London that they might be advertised in the provinces as having run for a hundred nights at the so-and-so theatre in London. This was, at first, capable of impressing the provincial, but he presently began to show himself less of a fool than the touring manager thought him. He stayed away from the touring manager’s faded copy of a London success, genuine or faked, and he stayed away from the local theatre’s penitential benches. He frequented, instead, the efficient music-hall and the efficient kinema ; he could rely on one good turn out of twelve in the music-hall, and he could rely on darkness in

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the kinema, with a sporting chance of a film which would make him forget to squeeze his girl's hand. But in the theatre he could rely on nothing except when the actor-managers made a Progress through the provinces ; then he could rely on the actor-manager more than on the play or on the company.

Seeing that the art of the theatre was on the up-grade in London at this time when it was on the down-grade in the provinces, there was naturally a good deal of grumbling from the provincials, but it amounted to little more than vague complaints. The British citizen is public-spirited in many ways, but it has not occurred to him that the theatre merits his public-spirited action. Later on, both at Glasgow and at Liverpool, the Repertory theatres had local shareholders, but the example in public spirit was set on the grand scale in Dublin and Manchester by a lady who belonged to neither city ; it was set by Miss Horniman. She did not initiate, but she rescued, the Irish Literary Theatre in Dublin ; in Manchester she initiated. Liverpool was the result of colonization from Miss Horniman's theatre in Manchester, backed, when the trial season had proved successful, by local shareholders. Both Glasgow, under Mr Alfred Wareing with money partly local and partly from Lord Howard de Walden, and Birmingham, under Mr Barry Jackson, owed something, but not all, of their impulse to the Manchester example of Miss Horniman. Repertory



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owes her the title of Queen Horniman. It is said that she had a 'blind spot'; that she could see no virtue in the poetic play; that the Birmingham policy, in the main, was to encourage the poetic play which Miss Horniman discouraged. Study of her Manchester productions does not bear out that charge, still less does the theatre of Yeats and Synge. 'Anything good' was her policy, and if plays in verse were infrequent that was because good plays in verse *are* infrequent and because the poetry of to-day is finding expression in prose—and not in verse plays.

The Repertory Queen hated the word 'repertory' and never used it. It is no doubt a misnomer, but some word must be used to indicate the difference between these stock companies, which regularly produced new plays in addition to reviving old ones, and the ordinary stock company which uses old plays only. There was a difference, too, in the kind of play, and the word 'repertory' has established itself as the name of the permanent local theatre with a permanent company reviving good plays and producing good plays with a little more regard for their artistic values than for their immediate drawing power. The misfortune is that permanence departed from the Gaiety in Manchester and from the Royalty in Glasgow; but, as we said of the Court, the soul goes marching on, and all that happened of Repertory in the year before the War may be only a first foreshadowing

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of the Repertory movement of the future. But Repertory, however gigantic it may grow, will never be ashamed of its pioneers. What Barrie, Shaw and Galsworthy were to the London movement, Synge, Houghton, and Brighouse were to the Repertory movement. But add Chapin and Calderon to Synge and Houghton and it will be perceived how luckless Repertory was in the premature deaths of so high a proportion of its authors. To be flippant, Repertory authorship was a dangerous trade. Financially, Repertory authors certainly lived dangerously ; they died, these four, with incalculable possibilities of good work undone.

The success of the Repertory movement was that it was provincial ; it failed when it forgot that it was provincial, but little blame attaches to its authors for that forgetfulness. Mr Arnold Bennett came into the theatre with the high prestige attaching to his novels ; it was he who was, if anybody, the man of destiny who could have broken down the tyranny of London in favour of plays about the provinces as great, as plays, as *The Old Wives' Tale* and *Clayhanger* are great as novels, or as *The Death of Simon Fuge* is great as a short story. But Mr Bennett went on, after his two first plays, to write London drama ; he gave in to the prevailing London sentiment that only London mattered ; and where one so placed as he was by the success of the Five Towns novels

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declined to make a stand in London for the drama of the provinces, who can blame the then unknown Houghton and the then unknown Brighouse for glancing at London even while they were writing *The Younger Generation* and *Garside's Career*? Not only the authors but the actors and the managements of the Repertories were suppliants for London approval; they came to London, chiefly to the Coronet Theatre, Notting Hill, and submitted selections of their year's plays for London judgment—the Irish theatre as well as the English: and really self-reliant, really arrogant provincial drama would have whole-heartedly adopted a 'You be damned' attitude toward London. There is a North of England and a South, Disraeli's *Two Nations*, Mrs Gaskell's *North and South*; there is contempt in the South for the North, which makes the money the South spends, and England's workshop wasn't known in the South. Here was work for the provincials! Why, every other novelist wrote about London, and, if not about London, then it was a Hardy who annexed Wessex as his literary province, or a Wells annexing Essex, or a Phillpotts annexing Dartmoor. Since the Brontës and Mrs Gaskell, nobody had expressed the North except Mr Bennett in Staffordshire; nobody of high merit had tackled Lancashire. And as to the drama of industrialism, it had practically been left alone; that is why Mr Harold Brighouse, writing a character

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comedy of the cotton operatives like the one-act play *Lonesome-like*, or a social drama of the coal-miner's life like the one-act play *The Price of Coal*, seems to be the characteristic representative of the Repertory movement ; and his tragedy of steam, *The Northerners*, goes farther, bites deeper into Lancashire character and into the causes of that character.

Northern character plays, chiefly comedy, were indeed the ' note ' of Miss Horniman's theatre, as far as the catholicity of her selecting allowed of any special ' notes ' at all. For she was not, first and foremost, a deliberate provoker of local drama ; if local drama got into her theatre it had to get there by being, as drama, at least as good as the drama which was not local. *The Younger Generation* is the suburbs anywhere, but in *Hindle Wakes* the people *think* Lancashire, and it is, because of that, the more universal play of the two. *Hobson's Choice* is a first-rate technical play with some minor lapses—it shares with *Hindle Wakes* the fault of having its best act first—but it is greater than its technique, because it expresses the soul of Lancashire.

After *Hindle Wakes* Houghton surrendered to London. The immense critical appreciation of that play hadn't made it a success at the Playhouse ; its success was in the provinces, and there was the sign for Repertory. The great provincial play was wanted by the provinces. Wasn't that good enough ? Wouldn't that suffice ? It might, indeed,

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have sufficed not merely for the Houghtons and the Brighouses, the exceptional Repertory men then and in the future, but also for the average Repertory author, had not the jealousies of the Repertories prevented. Professional authorship was given no chance and the plays themselves were given a poor chance, not because the acting was bad, but because the actors were overworked. Co-ordinated Repertory would have meant that the towns exchanged plays and companies; authors could have hoped for a living out of the increased number of performances, and actors could have hoped to do justice to themselves by reason of the more leisured rehearsals; but Repertory refused to co-ordinate itself. Each theatre kept itself to itself, with the result that producers, actors, and authors alike were all looking toward London as the only place where they could earn a livelihood on reasonable terms. Further, Mr Bennett having cold-shouldered the play about the provinces, and *Rutherford and Son* having had little more than a *succès d'estime* due partly to Mr Norman McKinnel's acting, it was inevitable that when the authors looked to London they should feel that their hope lay in abandoning provincial and in writing London plays. Mr Allan Monkhouse was definitely Lancastrian in *First Blood*, but his characteristic idiosyncrasy, in his austere and serious anti-war War-play, *The Conquering Hero*, as in *Mary Broome* and *The Education of Mr Surrage*, is

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precisely that he wouldn't be local, but was indeterminate of the suburbs. *Mr Surrage* makes jolly acting, but this man wrote *The Hayling Family* and overrated any audience's toleration of morbidity.

The four pinnacles of Repertory are *The Playboy of the Western World*, *Hindle Wakes*, *Hobson's Choice*, and *Abraham Lincoln*. To encourage local rivalries of the future, the score may be noted as two to Manchester, one to Dublin, one to Birmingham, and none to Liverpool or Glasgow ; but if it comes to contributions to the gaiety of nations, Dublin wins, hands down, with the farces of Lady Gregory. The plays of Mr Yeats convince one that he is a poet, while it is the younger Dublin men (dramatically, Mr Ervine is Abbey Theatre when he isn't with *Jane Clegg* Manchester, or with *The Ship* Liverpool)—it is Mr St John Ervine and Mr Lennox Robinson who are convincing as dramatists. Astoundingly, one has seen *Mixed Marriage* referred to as Mr Ervine's best play, and, astoundingly, it isn't. By all the canons of Repertory, of the sovereignty of local drama, a Belfast play ought to be the better play of a Belfast man than a London play. But the arbitrary last act of *Mixed Marriage* mars it, and the magnificent last act of *Jane Clegg* makes it. 'Squalid,' they called this play, but they went to see a recent revival at the New Theatre with unanticipated persistence, not because it had the London advantage of being a London play, but because it all, and chiefly

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the last act, gripped them. The final duologue of *Jane Clegg* is Mr Ervine's masterpiece, to date ; there is a similar, and a fine, duologue at the end of *Garside's Career*, but nothing in realistic drama has equally the sudden flowering into exquisite beauty of the final duologue of *Jane Clegg*. One may be wrong, but *The White-headed Boy* seems to be Mr Lennox Robinson imitating Lady Gregory ; whereas *The Lost Leader* has one of the best first acts of our time. More than *Art and Opportunity*, *The New Morality*, Harold Chapin's posthumous play, showed what a writer of comedy was lost when Chapin fell ; a Hubert Davies, uncorrupted by the actor-manager, with a sense of words and of comic situation surpassing Davies. By his connexion as a producer with Glasgow, by a one-act play, and by *Columbine* and a Christmas piece at Manchester, Chapin qualifies as a Repertory man ; but he was never a provincial, being, in strict fact, an American citizen.

The War was the Great Disintegrator, but the Repertories wilfully disintegrated their own impulse by their failure to co-operate with one another. There should have been a self-reliant, self-contrived drama of the provinces, independent of London patronage—the strong and free expression of the large life of the English provinces. That drama is the great undeveloped resource of the theatre.

## CHAPTER IX

### *The Case of the One-Act Play*

THE rise and fall of the one-act play synchronizes with the rise and fall of the Repertory theatres, which, if one-act plays were all, were easily the cocks of the whole dramatic walk. Perhaps that is because Shaw can't write a one-act play; it is a form too tight to hold him. Mr Alfred Sutro has accomplished some neat things in one-act form, like *The Man in the Stalls* and *Steinman's Corner*; they have good workmanship; they have dialogue of some fastidiousness; they have, in fact, everything except relevance to the modern spirit in drama. Barrie, who can hark back to the old with anyone, harked back in *Rosalind*; but the young man in *Rosalind* makes all the difference. "He is modest and clear-eyed and would ring for his tub in Paradise. . . . His brain is quite as good as another's, but as yet he has scarcely referred anything to it." On the stage one isn't sure if that perfect undergraduate is exhibited as successfully as in the delectable stage directions, but there is no doubt and there is no harking back to an old theme in *The Twelve Pound*



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*Look* or in the only great play produced by the War, *The Old Lady Shows her Medals*. It is not certain that the War's very worst play wasn't Barrie's *Der Tag*, for Barrie can do everything ; he could even write the forest act of *Dear Brutus* during the War ; and among the other things in which he is exceptional is his capacity to write one-act plays better than the Repertory men. He is their unique superior, though the charming duologue by St John Hankin, *The Constant Lover*, takes a high place among the one-acters of the time.

Opportunity, it has been observed, is a great thing ; Sir James Barrie writing a one-act play to-day can command an opportunity for its production ; can any other playwright ? The reply is, "Yes—in America ; in the Little Theatres." But in London ? In England ? No, the practice of writing one-act plays becomes an academic one in England since the decline of the Repertories, and yet, obstinately, one-act plays are written and, miraculously and sometimes amateurishly, they are produced. Lord Dunsany carries on ; Lady Gregory carries on ; Harold Brighouse carries on ; and publishers, like Putnam's and Gowans and Gray, are found ready to serve drama by publishing the plays. But perhaps they are published rather for America than for England, because it is in America that the Little Theatres, professional, semi-professional, or wholly amateur, act one-act plays consistently ;

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it is in America that publishers put out anthologies of one-act plays<sup>1</sup> (and prove, by including more British than American examples, that the British one-acter is still the best); it was in America that a dramatist, Mr Percival Wilde, first published a long book on *The Craftsmanship of the One-Act Play*; it is in America that they use one-act plays as English texts in schools and thereby teach children the difference between good plays and bad; and it was in America that the universities began to have chairs of dramatic technique.

As a matter of fact, the only notable one-act plays to emerge from America so far are Mr C. B. Fernald's *The Cat and the Cherub* and the plays of Eugene O'Neill; but how much longer can the English one-act play continue to live on air? It survives, in shorthand, as the revue sketch. But take one of the lightest, the most trivial, of the one-acters of the pre-War years (because it happens also to be quite as non-moral as any revue sketch)—take Houghton's *Fancy Free*. Would it 'fit into' revue? It is a light-as-air trifle of a one-acter, but it has a solidity which marks it as a different form from the light-as-air revue sketch. They *are* sketches; *Fancy Free* is a one-act play. They vanish, and it remains.

<sup>1</sup> Messrs Harrap have, as this book is published, produced a British collection entitled *One-Act Plays of To-day*, edited by J. W. Marriott.

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The curtain-raiser might or might not be a one-act play, but the habit of using curtain-raisers did give opportunity for the production, as curtain-raisers, of some one-act plays. The distinction between the curtain-raiser and the one-act play is that the one-act play, being an art-form, is misused as a front-piece interrupted by the banging of stall seats, and that the curtain-raiser went better to bangs which eclipsed it than to silence which revealed it. But the writers of one-act plays bore with the bangs—sufferance was the badge of all their tribe—and with the rudeness of late-comers who were wont to remark loudly, “It doesn’t matter, my dear. It’s only a curtain-raiser”; and the writers of one-act plays went on writing one-act plays in the faith that theirs was an art-form as definitely as the short story is an art-form and that, in time, audiences would cease to confuse the modern one-act play with the Victorian curtain-raiser. Recognition of the art of the one-act has, certainly, come in America; in England, it has come so little that the writing of one-act plays is regarded with contempt or, at least, as an amiable idiosyncrasy which authors who can afford to waste time may indulge if it pleases them. Fortunately, it does please some of them to be economic lunatics and—artists.

With an enthusiasm which occasionally outruns discretion, some American commentators have

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asserted that the one-act play is a new art-form. But *Everyman* is a one-act play, and if most of the morality and miracle plays were linked in cycles they are nevertheless one-act plays in individual form ; also, when comedy began, it used the one-act form in some of its first departures from the didactic morality play—for instance in John Heywood's *The Pardoner and the Friar*, *The Four P's*, and *John, Tib and Sir John* ; so that the one-act play is a revival of an old form, and in trying to put "the prose for God" with a modern accent into short, sharp plays the twentieth century was going back to the sixteenth. But it made the curtain-raiser of the nineteenth century look like a nursery charade.

The greatest one-act play of modern times—*Everyman* alone challenges it for first place in all time—is Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. There is no point in being modest about this play and in pretending that it cannot be a masterpiece because it is modern or because it is short. It belongs to a time of great drama ; it was of the same year, 1904, as *John Bull's Other Island*. It is a play about the Aran Islanders, but it is a local play which is universal. It tells in tragic, poetic, immortal prose the eternal story of the fishers, of men who go down down to the sea in ships and of women who wait. The other Synge one-acter, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, has less beauty of language and, of course,

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more comedy. It retells a story traditional not only among the Irish peasantry, but, as a recent correspondence in *The Times Literary Supplement* showed, among European peasants generally. Synge gave salty flavour to a special case, but in *Riders to the Sea* the case is universal. But the 'case' is not the whole of the matter. Synge wrote, "Drama is made serious—in the French sense of the word—not by the degree in which it is taken up with problems that are serious in themselves, but by the degree in which it gives the nourishment, not very easy to define, on which our imaginations live. . . . The drama, like the symphony, does not teach or prove anything." The case for *Riders to the Sea* is stated in those sentences because they state the case for all great drama ; they state the case against the possibility of didactic drama's being great. *Riders to the Sea* teaches nothing, but it "gives the nourishment on which our imaginations live."

To continue with the Irish one-acters, Lady Gregory's *Spreading the News* is also of 1904. She is prolific, but this play, with the nationalistic comedy so much more deeply felt than is usual with her work, *The Rising of the Moon*, and with that sublimation of back-chat, *The Workhouse Ward*, seems best to express her one-act drama. The craftsmanship is delectable ; it is almost too trustworthy ; it can be relied upon (in some of her later work) to cover some bare patches between her

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richly comic situations. The sense of character appears remarkable until it begins to appear monotonous; she has written farce which isn't funny, but what is one or even more than one among so many? As to Mr Yeats, it is his nationalistic *Kathleen-ni-Houlihan* which most convinces one that the poet Yeats can be a dramatist upon occasion. And Lord Dunsany? He is happiest when the manner of those early stories of his—*Time and the Gods*, *The Sword of Welleran*, and the rest—is used in drama with the English of the Bible and Bunyan, and with his fine inventions of strange names. He can give intellectual farce, like *The Glittering Gate* and *Fame and the Poet*, and it has the fragility of a revue sketch; it makes a good point in a hurry; but *The Golden Doom* and *The Gods of the Mountain* are meat for men, and *A Night at an Inn* is a high accomplishment in the macabre. "Let the stars hearken yet and I will sacrifice a child to them—I will sacrifice a girl child to the twinkling stars and a male child to the stars that blink not, the stars of the steadfast eyes." Decidedly, in spite of Mr Gordon Bottomley, his *Gruach*, and his *The Riding to Lithend*, poetry does not necessarily imply verse in drama.

Poetry can even be run into the rhythms of Lancashire, as Mr Brighthouse's *Lonesome-like* is there to show, but 'right pithy' comedy is the better description of his one-act theatre, which seems

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with the rollicking romantic farce of *The Happy Hangman* and the morality play *The Apple Tree* to be maturing at some distance from Lancashire. But *The Doorway* and *Spring in Bloomsbury* were early pieces which had nothing to do with Lancashire ; nor had the admirable war-fantasy *Maid of France*. There is an adventurous versatility about it all ; the miner's tragi-comedy *The Price of Coal* is far away from the delicate sentiment of *Followers*. In all one finds a subject well selected, and in the treatment that "nourishment on which our imaginations live " which Synge postulates.

Stanley Houghton scores high with *The Dear Departed*, that Lancashire-soaked version of a story of De Maupassant, and less high with *Fancy Free* ; but the dead dramatist with a genius for the one-act play was Harold Chapin. (In passing, two other examples by men who were killed in the war may be mentioned—George Calderon's *The Little Stone House* and Oliphant Down's pierrot fantasy *The Maker of Dreams*.) But Chapin nourished the imagination ; his one-acters don't belong to the theatre of lazy audiences or of flapper audiences. Chapin used the right words and expected his audiences to listen ; he had no doubt but that words were a dramatist's first necessity ; there is a story, quite credible, that, for practice in words, he made up triolets in his bath. *It's the Poor that 'Elps the Poor* is irony all the way—neighbours lavish with

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alcoholic consolation for the young wife whose child had starved to death while her husband is in prison; the return of the husband, humanely released, too late for the funeral; the money he had, in the prison governor's hands, which would have saved the child; the neighbours' gift of an enlarged photograph of the child—till the irony grows unbearable and the curtain falls. In another mood of irony is the study of a broken Scots colonel among coffee-stall customers in *The Autocrat of the Coffee-stall*; and, again, there is delicious dialogue in the mouth of the French husband in *Innocent and Annabel*; but the poor were Chapin's people, the Camden Town poor or the Glasgow poor, in *The Philosopher of Butterbiggins*. *The Dumb and the Blind* is simply first-rate.

The extraordinary penetration of Mr Allan Monkhouse's *Resentment* makes it notable among the one-act plays which one doesn't want to see twice; *Makeshifts*, by the late Gertrude Robins, is one of the most effective and veracious plays ever written about the suburbs; and the passionate beauty of Mr Charles Forrest's *The Shepherd* seems to bring W. H. Hudson's Downs and their poetry to live for us on the stage. But to what end, if there is no longer a stage which will permit the beauty and the humour of the one-act play to live? Even Cockney one-acters don't thrive. One thinks of 'Op-o'-me-Thumb and of Mr Fenn's *The Convict*



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*on the Hearth*, and of Mr Coleby's *Their Point of View*, and the conclusion is that writers of the one-act play have been discouraged in London until they write no more. There is, indeed, some sort of a Scottish Movement, moving very vigorously when Mr J. A. Ferguson writes *Campbell of Kilmhor* or when Mr Neil F. Grant writes *A Valuable Rival* : and the provinces may yet save the British one-act play. It is a form too expressive to be lost ; it has its modern classics, like *Riders to the Sea* and *The Twelve Pound Look*, like *Lonesome-like* and *It's the Poor that 'Elps the Poor*, like *The Golden Doom* and *'Op-o'-me-Thumb*. "All art is quite useless," wrote the author of a one-act play called *Salome*, and the one-act play is certainly 'useless.' What is to be done with half an hour of drama which isn't a music-hall sketch nor a revue sketch and only by discourtesy a curtain-raiser ? Even the Repertories were discourteous, but they did produce one-act plays, and perhaps there will be no general resumption of one-act play production until the Repertories, or their successors, are ready to function again. Miss Gertrude Jennings is allowed occasionally to remind London that plays in one act exist, but the serious one-act play is a theatrical outcast except when Sir James Barrie writes it. It is so hopelessly 'useless' ! But, for all its uselessness, the one-act play is the normal unit of the Village Theatre and of the New Amateur of the

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towns ; it is used by those very people who have broadened the basis of Repertory ; and they, if anybody, give grounds to hope that a new post-War Repertory movement is in its first stages of evolution. The Abbey Theatre began as an amateur organization, and the Birmingham Repertory began as the amateur Pilgrim Players. With such examples before us of the development (under patronage, it has to be admitted) of amateur organizations into leadership of drama, it is reasonable to be sanguine about the future growth of the present amateur movement. At the bottom of that movement is the one-act play. Therefore it is important that good one-act plays should continue to be written ; this 'useless' art-form is one of the hopes of England's dramatic future. We may reflect, for our comfort, that there were not many years from Heywood's *The Four P's* to Kit Marlowe, and the one-act play may be yeasty again, besides being a good thing in itself.

## CHAPTER X

### *Mr Norman McKinnel*

IT is said of the new Shavian drama that it evoked a new type of acting, 'head'-acting as opposed to 'body'-acting, and, true enough, one does not 'discuss' with one's body; there is an irreducible minimum of physical action in some of Shaw's plays. What should follow is that the 'new' actor acted the old actor off the stage in Shaw's plays, and as he did nothing of the sort we are entitled to the conclusion that Shaw makes no new demands on actors. He doesn't, because he is a playwright first and an intellectual afterward, and if the best Shavian actor was Mr Granville Barker, by reason of his amazing delivery of long speeches, the amazing delivery of long speeches by other actors, who were certainly not of any new school, is hardly less remarkable. Louis Calvert and J. D. Beveridge invented no new technique to enable them to become Shavian actors, nor did Forbes Robertson either, nor Mrs Patrick Campbell; there was no need, because their lines were written by a man whose sense of the theatre was as strong as that of any playwright of them all. Louis

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Calvert as Father William, as Broadbent, as Under-shaft, was a perfect instrument of the Shavian drama : Barker had hardly to *act* the Shavian young man in *You Never Can Tell* and *Man and Superman* and even in *Candida* ; he had to, and he did to a miracle, act Keegan in *John Bull's Other Island*. But if Shaw asks one thing of an audience beyond most other modern authors, he asks that they shall listen, and it follows that if he asks one thing more than another of actors, it is that they shall be elocutionists : in both the listeners and the speakers intelligence is postulated, and in all this Shaw may have been modern, or there may be no modernity in it at all, but only a throw-back to the Elizabethan theatre, where every play proves that the authors wrote rhetoric for audiences who loved it.

The extraordinary and perverse characteristic of young actors' acting was inaudibility in plays which cried out to be heard ! The responsibility, one must suppose, is Shaw's, illogical as that may seem at first sight, and remote as that is from the example set at the Court Theatre. Action keeps an actor at high pitch, and listening while another actor delivers a long speech induces a tendency to lounge. At any rate, and however induced, the tendency to lounge in body and to be lazy in elocution increased appallingly, whether the Shavian drama is or is not responsible. 'Naturalism' has its qualities, but if it implies inaudibility, then its

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defects outweigh its qualities. It does not, of course, necessarily imply inaudibility, and good actors aren't inaudible in any kind of play, but bad ones seem to find, in being asked to act naturally, an excuse for being slovenly. They are slovens by nature, perhaps? Then they have no business to pretend to be actors.

Possibly producers overdid the 'fourth wall' theory. The theory is that actors are not in a theatre, that there is no audience, and that actors are in a room behaving as they would naturally behave if they were really in a room. In a room one speaks quietly, and the actor who took his producer's instructions too literally could reply that he was being natural when he spoke inaudibly. All the modern producer meant was "Don't act *at* your audience; act at your fellow-actors"; and in that we have about all there is between the 'modern' and the 'old' school of acting. Shaw is a 'naturalistic' author—if *Back to Methuselah* is not naturalistic it is a big piece of Shavian philosophy and a small piece of Shavian drama—but he wasn't the whole of 'naturalism,' and, anyhow, it is only bad naturalistic acting which is bad.

Good naturalistic acting is very good, and the proof that Shaw was a part only of the naturalistic movement is found in the fact that if one were asked to name the typical actor of this period, the name would be of an actor who has hardly acted at all

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in plays of Shaw. The typical great actor of the naturalistic school, from *The Silver Box* at the Court to *Hobson's Choice*, when naturalism made its last stand before the theatre held the leave-front for cheerful idiocy, is Mr Norman McKinnel, who suffers neither from inaudibility nor from inability to 'put it over.' He is the typical actor of a time which had travelled far from the 'pretty-pretty' play and the 'pretty-pretty' hero, and there is food for thought there. The typical player was a man, and he was Mr McKinnel, though Mr McKinnel is neither a Barrie nor, except for *Candida* and *Don Juan in Hell*, a Shaw actor. He is a Galsworthy actor. (The typical Galsworthy actress, if there is one, is Miss Irene Rooke; from Mrs Jones in *The Silver Box* at the Court to Ruth Honeywill in *Justice* at Glasgow and at Manchester her power to express mute suffering marks her out as the typical woman of, at any rate, the earlier Galsworthy plays; but, more generally, there is a typical actor and there is not a typical actress of the pre-War movement.) Our typical actor was, one feels, only by chance not a typical Shaw actor. Thanks to fate are due for Louis Calvert's Undershaft, and a grudge against fate is due that we haven't seen Norman McKinnel's Undershaft—or Norman McKinnel's Crichton.

In calling Miss Horniman the Queen of Repertory the point was to be symbolic; it is in the same sense

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that Norman McKinnel is symbolic of the New Drama ; and in regretting that he hasn't been seen as Undershaft or Crichton one is only emphasizing the thought that Mr McKinnel does symbolize, in acting, the whole of the movement, though in concrete fact he hasn't acted some of the greater parts which might easily come within his wide range. It is not method alone, it is the Herculean figure of the man which makes him so apt a symbol for the acting needed by the New Drama.

The break with the old tradition is well indicated by contrasting the method of Norman McKinnel with the method of the late Sir Charles Hawtrey. (There was direct opportunity of contrasting the naturalistic method of Arthur Sinclair with the Hawtrey method in *Send for Doctor O'Grady*.) Hawtrey acted at his audience. So did all the old actors, even in the Robertson plays. Old comedy, of which *The School for Scandal* is the grand example, was written for double-edged acting ; that is why Gilbert's *Palace of Truth* is a most difficult acting exercise for the 'fourth wall' actor, but a comparatively easy exercise for the Old School actor, who is accustomed to act one thing to his fellow-actors and another to the audience. In *The Palace of Truth* one thing is spoken and another thing acted. Hawtrey was continually coming out of the picture by a blink (it was a blink rather than a wink) or a gesture addressed to the audience and supposed not

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to be seen by the actors on the stage. In conscientious study of intonations the Hawtrey way and the McKinnel way were equals, but, after that, the McKinnel school stays in the picture and the Hawtrey school breaks up the picture, as thoroughly, by that intrusive blink, as the old Shakespearian actor broke it up by coming down to the front of the apron-stage to deliver his soliloquy. The blink is effective enough, but it is an anachronism in modern plays, which are written, with few exceptions, in accordance with the 'fourth wall' theory; it is an excrescence, it is an actor taking a liberty with his author; it is non-naturalistic technique trespassing when it is used in a naturalistic play.

The play served the actor-manager, and the new actor serves the play. The play became, veritably, the thing. We have urged that the primary magic of the theatre is the magic of the spoken word; the actor-manager was of the same opinion, but he judged himself so magical a speaker as to suppose that the sort of words he spoke did not matter. He could cover over their weaknesses. Yes, and he could too! But he couldn't cover over the weaknesses of what other actors were speaking in actor-manager plays, and, because the strongest writing was concentrated on the actor-manager's part, those weaknesses in the smaller parts were apt to be very perceptible indeed, and there was no magic in the spoken words which led up to the scenes of the actor-manager. He



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shone by contrast—*moi-même et quelques poupées*—but it wasn't fair to the dolls and it wasn't fair to the audiences, who liked their actor-managers well enough, but, at the back of behind, liked better a fair distribution of the spoken words.

Plays began to be written, not indeed without leading parts, but with equal regard for the small as for the large parts. All the truth didn't go to a central figure, and all the incongruities to the others. The Star was no longer the whole team, but only the team's Captain, and team-work in acting became a vital quality. That is why the average standard of acting has been immensely improved by the naturalistic period, and—the defect of the quality again—that is why we suffer from a dearth of compelling individual personality to draw audiences into theatres. We cannot have it both ways ; the play-way and not the star-part-and-damn-the-rest way is the right way ; and the business of the theatre which it so cheerfully neglects is the encouragement of authors who will write the right plays and provide the right words to be spoken by actors.

The Court under Barker was naturalism *con brio* ; there were producers after Barker who left the *brio* out ; a well-produced naturalistic play never forgets the *brio*, and that might lead one to a disquisition upon character-acting in this period. Make-up and mannerism used to be the whole of character-acting, at any rate in minor parts. "I believe,"

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wrote Strindberg about acting, "that the artist is put into a sort of trance, forgets himself, and finally becomes the one whom he is to represent." It shall not be said that those who played small parts under the actor-manager system were not artists; but they did not become "the one whom he is to represent," because the star-part was made good by the inconsistencies of the small parts, and nobody can represent a bundle of contradictions; they compromised on make-up and eccentricity. But character-acting became real when the whole of a cast consisted of realizable, consistent characters, and truth replaced make-up as the essential of character-acting. Mr Dennis Eadie was the leading character-actor of the period; he acted in all four of the Galsworthy big plays, but one would point especially to Dennis Eadie in *Milestones* for the pattern of character-acting. Nor should the Repertories be forgotten in this matter: Arthur Sinclair and Maire O'Neill in *The Playboy of the Western World*, Herbert Lomas in *Lonesome-like* and *Hindle Wakes*—except that both are Lancashire parts, how *could* the same man play Sam Horrocks and Jeffcote?—Edyth Goodall as Fanny Hawthorn, Basil Dean's unmatched Jack Barthwick in *The Silver Box*, Sybil Thorndike's Jane Clegg, Milton Rosmer in *Garside's Career*, the late Charles Bibby as the old Gaffer in *Nan*. (What actors Mr Iden Payne picked for Miss Horniman! No, decidedly

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when it comes to speaking of the acting of this time the Repertories must not be forgotten.)

It will be observed that in naming, rather at haphazard, a few performances of Repertory players, three actresses have been mentioned; it may be added that Miss Irene Rooke, referred to earlier, became a Repertory actress. Four actresses!—a good score for the provinces at a time when, as we have said, there wasn't a typical actress in London. Miss Marie Tempest touched the fringe of the new movement with Chapin's *Art and Opportunity*; Miss Hilda Trevelyan seems more than Miss Vanbrugh the typical Barrie actress; Miss Lillah MacCarthy the typical Shaw actress; and Miss Rooke approximately the typical Galsworthy actress; but there is no actress to typify women's acting in the New Drama as a whole, and if there were it's by no means certain that one dare name her, because one would have to say of her that she was as clever as paint and not as pretty. The sort of beauty deemed by managers to be theatrically effective didn't go with the best acting of naturalistic plays; in other words, the vogue of the sex-play had declined. Commercially, that was a handicap; the beautiful woman who can act and who has also a sex-appeal fills theatres, and the actress to her fingertips who lacks sex-appeal is pushed aside by the attractive flapper. In sheer acting this period reached high standards, but pre-War serious authors

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hadn't the luck to find such auxiliaries as could be found to-day in Fay Compton and Gladys Cooper. Brains and beauty are a rare combination, although, as one has hinted, managerial insistence on the superior drawing power of beauty to brains seems overdone. The two best actresses of to-day are—often unemployed. But let us leave the ladies.

We come back, then, to Mr Norman McKinnel as symbol of the time's acting. It was virile and natural acting. It aimed at truth as opposed to effect. It kept in the picture and did not embellish lines by the silent gag of a wink or gesture addressed to the audience. Its emotion was justly proportioned to its cause, because by emotional acting *per se* you can sweep an audience off its feet, but they think it over afterward and conclude that they've been 'had'; but emotional acting which isn't beyond the natural passion arising out of the lines is felt to be authentic; it has the ring of truth, and it makes not a momentary but a lasting effect. The human voice can do wonderful things to an audience, and the human voice is the theatre's chief asset. How essential it is, then, not to depreciate the asset by counterfeit emotionalism! The restoration of truth in the theatre was the great accomplishment of naturalistic acting. It is, of course, not truth but the illusion of truth; but illusion procured sincerely means a convinced audience, and illusion procured insincerely means an audience which feels cheated.

## CHAPTER XI

### *The Censorship of Plays*

**I**N the year 1907 the newspapers published a protest against the Censorship of Plays which was signed by seventy-one men of letters and playwrights, including Meredith, Hardy, Swinburne, Barrie, Shaw, Wells, and Conrad. The Prime Minister, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, received a deputation, which addressed him on the subject of the abolition of the Censorship. The Censorship was not abolished : but later developments testify to the usefulness both of the deputation which argued for abolition and of the Censorship which was not abolished.

The agitation which culminated in that deputation was magnificently what is nowadays called a stunt, but a stunt is not necessarily insincere. The New Movement felt the Censorship galling, tyrannical, and, above all, ineffectual, because it passed the most worldly man-of-the-world plays and hit the reformers : it got wide advertisement for itself as a by-product of its attack on the Censorship, but the attack was perfectly sincere.

The plays of Bernard Shaw had, in G.B.S., the

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world's best press agent, and Shaw had not only any thinker's objection to the humiliation of being compelled to submit his plays to a court official, but the particular grievance that he had, with *Mrs Warren's Profession*, himself come under the Censor's ban. The attackers, then, had incomparable leadership ; they were not Quixotes tilting at a windmill : they were honest men urging the removal of a reactionary institution ; and in theory one agrees that it is monstrous to force the thinkers of our time, when they run their thought into drama, to submit to the judgment upon its suitability for public utterance of a special Censor in addition to the police, who take care in general of blasphemy and offences in print and speech against decency. The knowledge that their work would have to undergo this humiliation is alleged, definitely, to have prevented certain famous men of letters from writing plays. That may or it may not have been a loss to drama (because the plays of famous men of letters are sometimes egregiously bad), but certainly the liberty of the subject is specifically interfered with when he writes a play for representation in public.

The propagandists of abolition used to point, as a stock example, to the passing of a play called *The Giddy Goat*. They opposed to this certain weighty plays which had not been passed ; but they did not mention, because they hadn't the evidence, the light plays which had not been passed. They

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ignored the possibility of a still giddier goat which had not been licensed. Admittedly there is hardship in putting, say, Thomas Hardy on all fours in this matter with the author of *The Giddy Goat* and with the hypothetical author of a still giddier goat ; but there is a charming story told about Thomas Hardy and *The London Mercury*, which prints the usual notice to contributors that an addressed and stamped envelope must be enclosed with MSS. for return in case of rejection. Hardy, sending a poem to *The London Mercury*, enclosed an addressed and stamped envelope ! And one concludes that the greater the man, the less he resents submitting to a general rule. Now, the rule of the Censorship has to be general in the wide sense that once a play is licensed to be performed at any theatre in Great Britain, it can be performed at every theatre (except, it may be, an Oxford theatre). Mayfair's current view of morality doesn't, perhaps, coincide with the current view of morality in Aberdeen, though the process of levelling (up or down—one won't attempt to decide which) has certainly gone far to bring two views into line. Differences exist, and the Censor is not legislating only for the West End.

The result of the agitation was the happy one (besides the immense press-space which the serious drama won for itself) that the Censorship, which was then rather behind public opinion, is now abreast of it. Public opinion, it may be objected, has gone

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back, under the dragooning of D.O.R.A., to a complacency with Censorships, and perhaps it has, but, in that case, the Censorship has gone more than half-way to meet public opinion. The list of plays forbidden by the Lord Chamberlain at the time of the agitation is as follows: *Monna Vanna*; Brieux's *Maternité* and *The Three Daughters of M. Dupont*; *Mrs Warren's Profession*; *Waste*; *Ghosts*; *The Cenci*; Housman's *Bethlehem*; Edward Garnett's *The Breaking Point*; and *Ædipus Rex*. There are very great plays in that list, but it does so happen that no very great play among them is unlicensed to-day, and that if there is inconsistency to be noted it is in the licensing of *The Cenci* and in the continuing refusal of a licence to *Mrs Warren's Profession*. That list of plays is probably incomplete; it is the list issued by the then agitators, who had a case to prove. They proved their case, and the shower of licences which, as time went by, has fallen on these plays is evidence of the amenability of the Censorship; but they did not attempt to suggest, by a list of unlicensed, lewd plays, that there might also be a case for the Censorship.

Much pother was made at the time about Mr Edward Garnett's *The Breaking Point*. Mr Garnett is a literary critic of whom one can safely say that he writes art about art; but *The Feud*, an Icelandic Saga-play, and *Lords and Masters*, which he is understood to have written, though it was not



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announced as his, seem to prove him one of those men of letters who were attracted to the theatre without possessing the gift of writing stage-dialogue. It is not, of course, the office of the Censorship to quarrel with a play because it isn't stage-worthy, but it was the affair of the agitators to have made their concentration on a play better worth their efforts than *The Breaking Point*. They were lucky in that instance only because Mr Garnett's record proved him—the author, not his play—one of those distinguished outsiders whom the theatre wants inside ; the distinguished outsiders may or they may not turn out to be playwrights, but one wouldn't have them scared away from making the effort by the bogey of the Censorship. Technique can be learnt if they will trouble to learn it, and, postulating the inborn sense of the theatre without which nobody need hope to become a dramatist, the play by a man who has already earned laurels in other literary walks is likely to be worth producing. It is decidedly safe to say that the theatre won't produce it out of any sentiment of literary snobbery ; there is always the barrier against the man of letters that he isn't a man of the theatre until he has proved himself to be one ; and there is enough of the vicious circle about that without the addition of the Censorship as scarecrow. It is not true that the Censorship to-day doesn't say "Bo!" to a goose ; it is true that no author has any cause to feel

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apprehensive of the Censor unless he wilfully decides that his play must be about incest, or that it must bring Jesus Christ on to the stage, or that it must introduce Queen Victoria. These are not, after all, prodigious inhibitions; there is room for quite a lot of art between those bars; and the licensing of *Damaged Goods* went beyond the wildest dreams of the Memorialists of 1907. A European War had intervened, and the intransigent anti-Censorite may bitterly allege that nothing short of a European War was necessary in order to get a licence for a play which delivered a straight talk about syphilis. He may be right there, and the Army Council may have had influence in procuring the licence for *Damaged Goods*, but the Army Council had no interest in *Ghosts* and *The Cenci*, and the licensing of those plays is satisfying evidence of the Censorship's march since the days when poor Mr Redford was a butt of the Wits.

On the other hand, while one doesn't know what scandalous revue sketches the Censor has obliterated (one can guess, though), the Grand Guignol season at the Little Theatre affords sound evidence of the usefulness of a Censorship. The official reason given for the closing of that season was the impossibility of finding further Grand Guignol plays which the Censor would allow: and, of course, it was impossible. Grand Guignol had its special audience (of degenerates, doctors have been heard

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to say), and to keep that audience in being it was necessary to increase the dose, Grand Guignol having affinity to cocaine or any other drug to which the patient's constitution becomes accustomed. And most people agreed that the Censor had already, in what he had allowed, gone to the extreme limit of tolerance ; the psychology of a woman who has undergone an operation to cause sterility may have its authentic interest for the nerve-specialist, but one may be grateful that the French Grand Guignol play which exploited that pathological case was not performed at the Little Theatre. Interference with the liberty of the physical cocaine-taker is, by common consent, sound practice ; and so is interference with the liberty of the mental cocaine-taker. If it be true that the prohibitions of the Lord Chamberlain were the cause of the Grand Guignol collapse, that official and that office have earned the respect of all good citizens. But—*de mortuis*—the point for us is not to write a candid epitaph on the tombstone of Grand Guignol in England, but to thank the Little Theatre for providing so manifest a case for the continuance of the Censorship.

The theoretical case against the Censorship is overwhelming, and consistent logic in practice isn't possible. The 'bloody' battle is now won, but while 'bloody' was permitted in *Pygmalion* it was, later in the very same year, cut out of *Garside's Career*.

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But *Aren't We All?* has crowned that victory. The fact is that in permitting 'bloody' the Censor took a chance; he might or he might not have had public opinion with him, and, autocrat as he is said to be, he is ultimately governed by public opinion. 'Bloody,' especially the casual, veracious frequency of the word in the mouths of Eugene O'Neill's sailormen, offends the susceptibilities of many playgoers; so does the degree of nudity permitted to acrobatic dancers in revue; and the Memorialists of 1907 were certainly in the right in implying that the 'jolly night out' view of plays and playgoing was a ruling factor in the decisions of a Censorship which allowed *Dear Old Charlie* and banned *Ghosts*. We have not altered *all* that, but the Censorship has undoubtedly reformed itself since 1907; it is to Oxford that we look to-day for conspicuous Censorship absurdities. *Hindle Wakes* wasn't fit for undergraduates to see, but one doesn't remember the banning of any revue by the local Censor at Oxford. The Oxford independent Censorship is doubly preposterous at a time when the English universities, following the American or throwing back to Elizabeth, are taking drama seriously, with such appointments as that of Mr Ervine, in succession to Mr Barker, as lecturer in drama at Liverpool.

Any logician can state the case against any Censor, and a Lord Chamberlain who functions only on

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plays written since 1737, so that, as far as he is concerned, Wycherley's *The Country Wife* can be played without cuts, is in a curious position ; but we are an illogical people (to the despair of the French), and the satisfactory working of the Censorship is one of our triumphs of illogicality. Everybody isn't satisfied, but the Censor's is, in amiable practice, a six-day week. The Sunday societies are winked at when they produce an unlicensed play, and the reply to those who assert that aphrodisiac entertainments are permitted on weekdays and their stern correctives permitted, by indulgence, only on Sunday nights to subscribers is, "What were the aphrodisiac scripts like before the Censor received them?" It is not true, of course, that the correctives are visible only on Sundays and only to subscribers—e.g., *Damaged Goods*—and the real advance the Censorship has made since 1907 is that it now permits the serious discussion on the stage of subjects which once were the monopoly of flippancy. But the immoralists are more likely to fall foul of the modern Censorship than the moralists, and really it is difficult to agree with the objectors to a Censor that he is objectionable. He is a theoretic tyrant and a standing insult to serious authors, but practically there is no drama, however earnest and however advanced, which has anything to fear from him. The Deity, recent royalty, and incest are not tyrannously but reasonably prohibited : and

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if the serious author is clever enough he can find ways round ! They exist, and a spade isn't always called a spade.

Under Censorship the greatest drama since Elizabeth was written in England in the pre-War years of the twentieth century. It would have been no greater had there been no Censor.

## CHAPTER XII

### *The Theatre of the Flappers*

THE War-time theatre has no excuse, except that it was the War-time theatre and couldn't help itself. It reflected accurately the spirit of the times and deteriorated progressively as the deadly years went on, in ideals and in all the finer things. The monstrous runs of *A Little Bit of Fluff* and of *Chu Chin Chow* are its true monuments ; it is still one of Britain's devastated areas, and provides one among the many overwhelming arguments for the abolition of war. In the early days, and even in the first years, it made efforts ; then the Zeppelins ceased to trouble playgoers and the theatre was made safe for profiteers. It was the theatre of the ' night out ' with a vengeance.

The English soldier hadn't a great deal to do with it. For some, London was glamorous on any terms ; others glanced at London and fled it to the trout streams and the quiet of country homes. The British soldier was another matter, and he hadn't a quiet English home to go to. Very likely he'd have gone to it if he had ; but it isn't even the whole truth to say that the London theatre was

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butchered to make a Colonial holiday. It was butchered for the War-time flapper.

The men on leave came and went, but she remained, helping one soldier after another to spend his money on the entertainments she chose. She was an excited, uneducated young person who couldn't be bothered to listen to a play unless it had melodrama and jejune sentimentality in slabs ; she knew it was a jolly War, because it brought home men in uniforms, and that thrilled her sexually ; she was quite possibly working hard to win the War herself, and wangling income-tax on her wages, but when the monotonous day's work was done she felt that she had earned her fun ; and she was of every class socially, but she was temporarily of the stalls class in the theatre, because the Colonial soldier had money to burn. The old stalls public was otherwise engaged, or else it had become the upper-circle public and hadn't noticed (such is the insidious poison of War and the steady deterioration of public entertainments in War-time) that the quality of the plays had made them not worth seeing. It had become flapperish in mind itself.

It is facile to blame the managers, especially when so many of them made only the slightest pretence to be theatre-managers at all. They were merely men with money, piling into theatres which were too few to hold them, so that they sat one on top of the other, sub-lessee on sub-lessee, until the



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rents grew fantastic for the last man in and he *had* to please the flapper or be ruined. To do him justice, he rarely failed to please the flapper; he had a mind remarkably like theirs, and even the pukka theatre-manager, the man who had done good work in the old days, couldn't escape the microbe of flapper-drama. He was either temporarily persuaded that flapper-drama was work for a man or else he was forced by competition to forget his self-respect. The old saw, about the drama's laws the drama's patrons give, had insistent relevance in the War-time theatre, and the ruler of the roost was the half-baked, over-heated flapper. Damn her, she blighted English acting by reducing elderly non-eligible-for-service actors to the status of clowns; she banished subtlety and beauty and anything which appealed to the mind instead of the senses, and, pity her, it wasn't her fault. *C'est la guerre*. But if you are acting for a War-baby you have to be emphatic about it or you are lost; and bad habits stick. That was the worst of it—that the War-theatre did not cease to be the War-theatre, but became the demobilization-gratuity theatre, and that the microbe of flapper-drama isn't yet extinct.

It is strange at first sight that the War-theatre was not the actress's opportunity; then, surely, was her chance to replace Mr McKinnel as symbol of English acting. That symbol was certainly pigeon-holed, but not in favour of an actress, because the

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flappers in the stalls wanted to see flappers on the stage. No heroine need apply for the suffrages of the flappers if she looked a day older than twenty-one; that is why an actress did not become the symbol of acting, and that is a trouble which remains. Englishwomen, in any case, are exceptions when they can act, and the dearth of actresses is aggravated to-day by the fact that young women who should have been in hard training from 1914 to 1920 were, instead, displaying their immature charm in leading parts and omitting to be trained.

The telescoping of music-hall management with music-comedy management and then with legitimate management reached its full development toward the end of the War. Such managers were as pernicious as the business-men profiteers, and intelligent audiences showed their intelligence by stopping away from their theatres. Not yet have intelligent people been fully persuaded to return to their old habits of playgoing, and hardly have the theatres regained for them their old familiar look. Theatres became show-boxes during the War, and any theatre was held to be suitable for any sort of play. The Haymarket was almost solitary in keeping to its policy of legitimacy, and even at the Haymarket queerish things happened. It was beyond the sensibility of the new managers to appreciate that a playhouse has an atmosphere of its own; the death of Sir George Alexander did not dissipate the old

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St James's audience so much as the death of the St James's atmosphere. Theatres played general post to jazz music, and if we can point to-day to one Globe Theatre which under Miss Löhr has a settled policy, we can point to a dozen which have no policy at all except one of financial opportunism, which means renting the theatre to any high bidder. Theatres have become places of no importance, because they have lost their characters: reconstruction of character is, happily, in process—at the St Martin's, for instance. But even a musical-comedy house has to look to its character, and the soul of the Gaiety seems to have wandered up Drury Lane to the Winter Garden, leaving the Gaiety to a confusion from which Mr Robert Evett seems likely to rescue it. Are there no elderly maiden aunts who when up in town still go to the Lyceum because it was Irving's theatre? There, indeed, in the fall of the Lyceum to a music-hall, and later in its moderate rise to a melodrama house, we have a pre-War anticipation of the War-time meddling with the character of theatres. War didn't damage only the drama; it soiled the playhouses: it raped them. But the flappers didn't care; nobody cared; there was a War on, and why blame the flappers for caring nothing for decent tradition when Lord Rothermere wanted to turn the British Museum into offices for the Air Force?

The rescue of the theatre from flapperdom is being

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slowly effected. Even during the War there were oases in the desert, such as, during the Zeppelin nights and before the flapper boom, *Hobson's Choice*, and, during that boom, the miracle of *Dear Brutus*, but these were exceptions which proved the rule. The rule, the norm of the War-theatre, was *A Little Bit of Fluff* and *Chu Chin Chow*, and the norm of the demobilization-theatre was *Chu Chin Chow* and *Paddy the Next Best Thing*: above and beyond them all was he who symbolizes the War-time theatre, Mr George Robey. The flapper loved *The Bing Boys*; she loved to giggle at Mr Robey from the encircling arm of her tall Australian; she loved him more than she loved Mr Hastings Turner's witty revue *Bubbly*, which, for the surviving playgoer of intelligence, was one of the few digestible tonics. And if *Dear Brutus* was one miracle, raising sentiment to the pitch of spirituality, the 'Old Vic' was another. *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* came long before the War: in it is Felix Drinkwater and his 'penny dreadfuls.' "Yer dunno wot them books is to me. They took me aht of the sawdid reeyellities of the Waterleoo Road. They formed maw mawnd." Under War there were realities in the Waterloo Road still more sordid, but opposing them was the Old Vic carrying on its productions of Shakespeare. If the Old Vic didn't form our minds in those days, the hope is permissible that some Colonial homes have a better

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opinion of London in War-time because of the Old Vic.

But we need not dwell on the exceptions, because the devastation of the art of the theatre caused by the War has to be realized before the magnitude of the task of reconstruction can also be realized. Criticism, of course, refused duty. That was kind of it at first, in Zeppelin-time, and misguided in boom-time. Criticism is the good policeman, and it might have headed the flappers away from the coarser entertainments, but it didn't try. Mr Archer has recently complained in *The Old Drama and the New* that criticism has not yet awakened to the fact that "in the last twenty years the English drama has become one of the most fertile and flourishing provinces of English literature." Certainly there are no dramatic critics like Shaw, and the brief that could once be held for the dramatic criticism of that gentlemanly spinster, *The Manchester Guardian*, can be thrown up since C. E. Montague has virtually ceased to go to the theatre; but if any critic ever rolled the right logs it was Montague log-rolling Synge, Maschfield, and Galsworthy, and the only mistake *The Manchester Guardian* made was the venal one of exalting one of its staff, Monkhouse, over Houghton and Brighouse. But one swallow does not make a spring, and the great period did lack its critical appreciations. Mr Walkley, as he confesses in *More*

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*Prejudice*, changes his tastes as time goes on ; one would say that ideas in the theatre now irritate the man who once, in *Drama and Life*, pleaded for fewer 'absent-minded' plays. But, bless the critics (those who were not away), how they appreciated the War-time entertainments ! It was well-intentioned, but it played disastrously into the hands of the music-hall manager and the filibustering speculator. It implied to those gentry that they could do no wrong, and it forced the remaining managers to drug their consciences, to put up spy-plays of the cheapest sort in sheer self-defence. The money-rot in the theatre to-day is a War-legacy, but if criticism hadn't encouraged the speculators to encourage the flapper, the rescue of the adult theatre from the wreckage might not have been so long and desperate a business as it is proving to be.

As to that money-rot. They competed hectically for the privilege of entertaining the flappers, knowing that whatever show they put up they could hardly go wrong ; criticism wasn't trying to keep the public out from the brain-addling shows, and nothing else could. Consequently a rent of five or six hundred a week could be paid and a profit could still be shown. High salaries could be paid to attractive entertainers. Costs leapt up in all directions, but it didn't matter, because the public was more frantic to come in than the costs were to go up. Then the boom broke, and the balloon

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burst, and the Bankruptcy Court filled, with the result that there is a quite monstrous inequality of opportunity in theatrical management to-day. There are about half a dozen theatres managed by the original lessee on leases surviving from pre-War days. The other theatres are still loaded up with lessee on lessee. Some casualties have relieved the pressure, but in the circumstances of these still speculator-ridden theatres it is actually reasonable to ask a £400 a week rent, and the man who comes into such a theatre at such a rent is competing with those half-dozen lucky theatres whose *total* rent (if we allow for what is got back by letting off the bars) doesn't greatly exceed £400 a week. Not to mention the terms of the lease, which may mean that Mr A, first lessee, retains six stalls, Mr B, second lessee, another six, and so on ; so that if the play attracts absolutely full houses the manager is deprived of the takings from perhaps as many as twenty stalls, and some one, and possibly several some ones, may grab a commission on the receipts into the bargain. And the chances of a play's attracting absolutely full houses under post-War financial conditions are very small.

But the necessity to think in terms of full houses is apparent, and the half-success which draws the thinking few won't do. The whole success or nothing ! And the whole success, if it isn't quite the flapper-play of old, isn't too likely to be over-

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burdened with thought. The surprise, and the good sign, is that in these antagonistic circumstances post-War drama is lifting its head. The theatre, the real theatre, is immortal ; it is rising out of the wreck, and the black partners, Mars and Mammon, no longer have their fiercest stranglehold upon it. A shrewd by-wind, indeed, blows on the sovereignty of words, but, take it for all in all, the theatre is a sturdy convalescent from a wasting sickness. And the flapper ? She has found out that one can have too much of the good thing called freedom ; she has rediscovered parental control ; she has found a parent who is not Victorian, but neither is he with our army in Flanders.



## CHAPTER XIII

### *Post-War Tendencies*

THE flapper-free War-time theatre existed away from London and away from the munition centres, and it was (in moderation) a serious theatre. One of the hopeful signs to-day is the rapid increase of amateur acting ; it is hopeful because of the growing percentage of amateurs which aims to be independent of the West End success. That percentage is still small, and the problem of the local author who is writing for local amateur production is acute. Amateurs must have good acting plays, because they lack the technique to cover over the weaknesses in indifferent acting plays, and local authors with the capacity to write a good acting play are rare, and unlikely to remain local once they have proved their capacity. Mr J. R. Gregson, author of *T' Marsdens*, represents the local author at his highest development ; two of his plays reached the Everyman Theatre, and one of them won unstinted praise from the London Press. Mr Gregson is one of the reasons why one looks to the amateur societies to foster and develop the provincial drama of the future ; most amateur societies

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are not, but any amateur society can be, a Repertory theatre in the making.

The 'new' amateur is not new at all, but his multiplication dates from the disbanding of our troops. They had sat in the flapper-free camp-theatres in England, and they had seen the plays sent to those theatres by Captain Basil Dean for the Canteen Board. They had sat in the flapper-free overseas theatres, and they had seen the plays performed in those theatres by the Lena Ashwell organization under the Y.M.C.A. And they had discovered a new emotion. Some of them, from the villages, may never have seen a play before; others, from the towns, may have been sufferers from that curious class-consciousness which decides that the music-hall is for the poor and the theatre for the rich, or they may have stopped away from the theatre because of its hard benches. In any case, few of them had seen the sort of plays which Captain Dean and Miss Ashwell provided. They were not 'highbrow' plays, but neither were they rubbish; and, returning to the villages and towns with a new-born appreciation of drama, men determined to continue for themselves and to pass on to others the pleasure they had derived from seeing plays. If nobody would act these plays for them at home, they would act them for themselves, in any barn or in any old army hut. French's paper scenery solves a problem, or they may have no

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scenery at all, or they may evolve a scene-painter. But they put accessory in its proper place, and they get on with the acting of plays. Some of them get on with the writing of plays.

This movement has grown to such dimensions as seriously to threaten the incompetent professional actor. Excellent—because it does not threaten the competent, and it does drive up the standard of professional acting. It forces professional acting to be visibly superior to amateur acting, and it creates the playgoing habit, which it may very possibly be substituting for the pleasant-evening-in-the-chapel habit. But it requires, if it is to benefit the professional actor, that he shall be better worth seeing than the amateur: and the professional is safeguarded to some extent because, as a rule, the amateur can't get new plays until the touring manager has done with them. But the amateur movement as a whole is jeopardized by the unscrupulous few who attempt to get plays either for nothing or on a royalty which puts the amateur, who acts for his own pleasure, on an equality with the professional, who acts for bread and butter. Mr Bernard Shaw is, if not the inventor, the prominent supporter of the royalty scheme for amateurs. He advises them not to act for any charity, to put any profits to reserve, and to call themselves professionals or "Community Players" or some such label; and he is then prepared to

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grant them the use of his plays on professional terms. He means well, no doubt, and it is good for the new amateur to perform the plays of Bernard Shaw, but is hard on (i) poorer authors and (ii) professional actors. The standard fees to amateurs are properly not royalty but fixed price, and the amateur has the alternative of the whole non-copyright drama. The disservice Shaw does to his fellow-authors by letting his plays cheaply to amateurs who pretend not to be amateurs because they don't act for charity, and the disservice he does to professional actors by putting amateur fees as low as he puts professional fees, is manifest.

The fee-dodging amateur is a minor point, and prominence is here given to him and to his virtues rather than to his vices because he is a reassuring sequel to the flapper-free phase of the War-time theatre. The point about the amateur is that he cares for words : he may care more for the words of Ernest Denny and Ian Hay than for the words of Granville Barker and St John Ervine, but the amateur's drama is the drama of words. He hasn't the financial resources and he hasn't the stage equipment for spectacle, and he is forced back to essentials, to simplicity, to the clash of speaker against speaker. Visitors to Russia have reported a remarkable peasant-drama resulting from the compulsory simplification of all stage accessory ; the same compulsion rests upon the amateur in the villages and

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the provincial suburbs, and a local author, writing for his local group, is disciplined to simplicity by the impossibility of getting production unless he is simple. It does not follow that he will be a great playwright, but that way greatness lies; and if the new amateurs are fertile at all they will be fertile in a drama of words combined with action in a setting which suggests by simple means. The failing of 'expressionism' is its realism; in pretending to get away from realism it achieves it to a far higher degree than any designedly realistic play. The amateur theatre can't 'realize' a country-house interior; it can do better; it can suggest, and it can leave something to the imagination of the audience. 'Expressionism' is fellow with the kinema in refusing to trust to an audience's imagination; *R.U.R.* showed everything and hinted at nothing, and the new cry about psychological plays which explore the inside of a man's mind and display his thoughts is reduced to absurdity by the red and childish whirl of the murder scene in *The Adding Machine*, produced by the New York Theatre Guild. The amateurs must stand for sanity because they are not equipped for scenic extravagances, but also, one is confident, because their sequel to the camp-theatres and the theatres at the Front is the sane sequel to a sane example. But it is, as yet, a very young sequel.

The London theatre is another matter. It is

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not to be suggested that London standards of stage production should be those either of the provincial amateurs or of the Russian peasant-theatre ; but it is suggested that the business man who came into the theatre during the War was encouraged by his limited experience at a special time to take a special view of stage production. "In order to make money it is necessary to spend money." That is a business man's axiom, but the special circumstances of the War-theatre led him to this entirely false corollary to the proposition—"The more money you spend in the theatre, the more you will make." The Co-Optimists have already been mentioned as a leading case against the business man's view that money can do everything ; it can't ; money is necessary in the theatre, especially in the theatre as the rent-profiters have made it, but beyond a necessary minimum it is true to say that the more brains are used, the less money need be used. Two good post-War plays, for instance, *Abraham Lincoln* and *A Bill of Divorcement*, stand advocates for simplicity in staging no less than for the sovereignty of words in the theatre. There is no need to over-stress this principle ; the eye must be considered, and a succession of plays in one set only grows monotonous. The economy in stage-staff is false economy if the unchanged set results in an audience which feels cheated of legitimate variousness, and the War-theatre's coat of many colours needn't

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be changed for sack-cloth. Simplicity drives drama to be dramatic ; that is the case for simplicity ; and the new post-War movement, away from naturalism, has yet to prove its case both economically and dramatically.

There is no reason why drama should sit down, content with the naturalistic play, and should feel that it has no more worlds to conquer. The novel has been attacked by a disease called psycho-analysis and is recovering from that malady ; drama has that warning before it, and, of course, the revolt from realism began long before the War. Gordon Craigism is the theatre's reaction to the anti-representational movement in modern painting ; in the case of the play which requires decoration it is the revolt from the art of the chocolate-box cover ; and it couldn't help but make its effect upon stage scenery. It is no longer 'advanced,' and the point indeed may be suggested that the theatre is not the place for experiments in advanced decorative art, because if the *décor*s gives the impression of strangeness it attracts the eye and distracts from the drama. The unexpected should occur in the words, not in the accessory, and any manner of decoration which goes beyond those theories of art to which the public has grown accustomed by practice in the picture galleries is to be discouraged in the theatre. Pre-Craig, the theatre's *décor*s lagged, with Tree and Irving, behind the modern norm of painting ;

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but drama goes by the board when the theatre is made the excuse for decorative novelty. The word-man, not the paint-man, is the theatre's creative artist, and the case against expressionism is that it is not simple. It may become simple, but *Angelo* was not simple. We can lump together the production expense of three notable post-War plays—*A Grain of Mustard Seed*, *The Faithful Heart*, and *At Mrs Beam's*—and the total cost is certainly less than the cost of *Angelo*, while as to effectiveness—there was no effectiveness in *Angelo*. It pursued an idea through acres of canvas, and it is not perverse to instance that costly futility, because it had, at the back of behind, an idea—the idea of expressing a man's thoughts. It used the most elaborate stage machinery and failed to express anything, but it proved, monumentally, that the theatre copying the kinema is lost, and that words—intelligible, dramatic words—are the theatre's sheet-anchor. Eccentricity of idea differs from originality, and drama has definite limitations. 'Expressionism' is not very perceptibly an English malady, though one supposes that Mr W. J. Turner's *The Man who ate the Popomack* is expressionist; it has been described as a play about a stink, with philosophical embellishments. *R.U.R.* was practicable because for three acts out of four it gives vivid and melodramatic expression to an idea familiarized to us by Samuel Butler and by the craftsmanship revival of the



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William Morris group in opposition to machinery. It gives nourishment to the imagination (to re-write Synge's phrase) about the effects of the industrial revolution. And *The Insect Play*, similarly, gives nourishment, of a kind highly unpalatable to a sentimentalist ; but there is nothing eccentric in saying by means of a cynical fantasy that civilization is no more humane than nature. Lots of people, in their pessimistic moments, have reached the same conclusion as the Capeks. But it would appear that, at bottom, expressionism makes an indirect approach and naturalism a direct approach to the statement of a point of view ; and the newer the point of view is, the more the direct approach is to be preferred. Is it better to leave the theatre perplexing oneself with the question, " What's the fellow getting at with his allegory ? " or to leave it saying, " Yes, I see what he means. I wonder, now, do I agree ? " If the provoking of thought is the point of a serious play, it is better surely that there should be no obscurity in the play's meaning, or thought is frittered away on the play when it ought, after leaving the theatre, to be concentrated on the message of the play. But perhaps what, even more, is wrong with expressionism is that it has messages. It is a way round to didacticism *via* fantasy and allegory ; and didacticism is the devil. *R.U.R.* is didactic ; *Strife* isn't. *Chains* treats the city clerk as a human being, and *The Adding*

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*Machine*—a derivative of *R.U.R.*—treats him as a machine. It seems that expressionism is the new sociological drama, differing chiefly from the old in treating men not as men but as ‘cases,’ and also in taking capricious liberties with dramatic form. *The Machine Wreckers* is not as good a play about the Luddites as *The Northerners*. Still, this dramatic infant, expressionism, must not be strangled at birth; if it is sociological it is serious, and the tendency in London to escape from seriousness to French farce or to English country-house comedy is pusillanimous. The theatre *must* accurately be the mirror of the times, and if these times are not serious they are nothing. They are not times accurately mirrored by *The Insect Play*, which is a pessimist’s night out, but they are caricatured by a theatre which was falling into the error of making the light comedies of Mr Milne its principal fare: that was to go back to indulging the mildly reformed preferences of the flappers. The men who made the theatre of the great period may, some of them, be in the veteran class to-day; but the crushing out of the younger survivors of that time by the still speculator-ridden post-War theatre is a curious and regrettable mistake. It is due, in part, to the pressure not so much of the flapper herself, but of the flapper-idea among managers, partly to the pressure of America. And it is very, very bad for the adult British drama.

## CHAPTER XIV

### *The Pressure of America*

ENGLISH actors have done better for themselves in America than have American actors in London, and English playwrights have drawn more royalties from America than American playwrights have from England. But that is a long-distance view, and recent years show England more an importer than an exporter of plays and, possibly also, of acting. Successes like *Romance* and the *Potash and Perlmutter* series go far toward putting the balance in America's favour, if recent years only are to be considered : and the man, actor or playwright, who suffers as a result of America's pressure to-day is not likely to take comfort in the thought that other actors and other playwrights some years ago found gold-mines in America. And why does America press hardly on our native drama ? Why do so many American plays reach London ? Only American acting can do full justice to a fully American play, and so we get the competition of American plays imported complete with an American company, often with American scenery. On our part, we do the same ; a fully English play needs to

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be acted in New York by a wholly English company, as happened with *Milestones* and, more recently, with *Loyalties*. But there are also American plays which, possibly to their detriment, are acted here by English or by mixed English and American companies. Lately there have been more of their plays coming to us than of our plays going to them. Is it because in the world play-market this country can no longer deliver the goods ?

The two chief factors in the situation are the new English manager and the new American play ; and if the new American is demonstrably superior to the English play, then there is nothing to be done until the English playwright pulls himself together and improves in his turn upon the American. Free trade in art stands as a principle outside politics. But *is* the new American play demonstrably superior to the English play ? Are American words more ' right ' than English words ?

Now, by the ' new ' manager is meant the man in control of a theatre who was once either a music-hall manager or a business man who had not even the music-hall man's approximation to being a man of the theatre. As music-hall manager he was accustomed to think about turns internationally, because acrobats and dancers do not use words on the stage, and as for the business man, he was under the impression that he knew success when he saw it. The cost of a trip to New York is very small as

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compared with the cost of a failure in the theatre, and the difficulty of assessing a play from a script is very great, especially to an amateur. The old manager shouldered that difficulty and read plays, trusting, and not foolhardily, to his experience. The new manager shirked reading ; it was so much easier and so much more pleasant to go to New York. Arrived there, he saw plays in performance and he saw them being successful before audiences (plays which were not successful did not interest him), and he had to ask himself not "Is this a play which will go ?" but only "Will this play which goes in New York also go in England ?" Some measure of judgment was required to answer that question, but it is an easier question to answer than the question asked about a script, "Is this a play ?"

One defect in this device for getting plays for London is this : the play which makes an obvious international appeal is either a great play or it is merely a very well-made play. Great plays leap over frontiers, but great plays are rare : on the other hand, well-made plays are common in America. A sound case can be put for the good intentions of the average English play, but a very much better case can be put for the good technique of the average American play. France was, England never was, and America is, the home of the well-made play. America is also the home of Mr Ford : and that has its relevance. So have these words of Anatole

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France—"Be sure a single beautiful line has wrought the world more good than all the masterpieces of mechanism."

Technique, it is unoriginal to reflect, is a good servant and a bad master, and while standardization has gone farther in the case of the American film than of the American play, the effect of instruction in technique, from the correspondence colleges to Professor Baker of Harvard, has been to raise the efficiency of the average American play to a remarkable height without adding anything to its powers of nourishing the imagination. Exceptions, like Eugene O'Neill, don't alter the rule, and the rule is a general, an all-pervasive, excellent standard of technique together with an emptiness of content. They get over the footlights, do these Americans, with material which is not worth getting over. That is, doubtless, a too sweeping generalization, but it is not sweeping if limited to the American plays which the English and Anglo-American managers allow us to see in England ; it is just the well-made, lazy listener's play which attracts them either personally or because, as managers, they are obsessed by the flapper-idea. The well-made play gets there ; it goes the whole of the way to an audience and does not ask any audience to go half-way to meet it.

There is nothing wrong about the pregnant play which is well made ; on the contrary, there is every-

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thing right ; but the sterile well-made play belongs to the theatre, not of art, but of craftsmanship. And English audiences have proved less discriminating about American plays than American audiences about English plays. Because they were successes here, three flapper-plays were exported to New York—*A Little Bit of Fluff*, *The Blue Lagoon*, *Paddy the Next Best Thing*—and they were, to put it mildly, not well received. But the well-made *Daddy Long-legs*, the exceptionally well-made *The Bat*, and its not quite so well-made successor, *The Cat and the Canary*, found enthusiastic welcome here. That reflection is not pleasant ; the re-education of our audiences seems not to have gone very far, and the importing managers seem good showmen. But there have been, to set against any undue confidence in the showmanship of those managers, many disastrous importations, not only of plays like *Lawful Larceny*, but of revues and musical comedies. To be modest, we could do as badly ourselves, and if the revue question and reply, “ Is it a success ? ” “ No, it’s an American play,” were hardly justified by the facts it remains true that a large percentage of importations have proved nothing but the misjudgment of their importers. It is only on the face of it that it is wiser to go to New York and to buy a ready-made success than to stay at home reading new plays. But is the ‘ new ’ manager wise about plays ? Nobody can predict with certainty the success or

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failure of a play existing only in MS. ; but the older manager had some sort of *flair* ; he wasn't infallible, but he put on what he liked. He had definite tastes and he wasn't a universal showman. The new manager has no *flair* and no preferences ; he merely goes into the market and buys a foreign success (farce from Paris, musical comedy from Berlin or Vienna, and success in any form from New York) in the hope that it will make an English success. He pays through the nose for it in dollars, and the successful Viennese is strong enough to get paid in sterling ; meantime the unemployed English playwright starves or uses his pen in any profitable way ; and as to the future of English drama, these our masters care less than nothing, being too busy bidding against each other for American successes to read the plays of reputable, let alone unknown, British playwrights.

The pretence is even made that it is enterprising to go to New York ! It is not ; it is an enjoyable combination of business with pleasure, and the enterprising thing is to read English plays and to use brains and imagination in the reading. If the new manager has neither, let him employ readers, artistic advisers, who have both. But if readers are employed in order to deal with the MSS. which come in, the judgment of the readers is scorned, and the play seen in New York is preferred to the play in MS. recommended by the reader. Quite a number



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of English plays have, as a result, actually had their first production in America, and English managers have paid a bonus to secure for England a play on which they might have exacted a bonus from America! But, naturally, the *usual* comment of the American manager when offered an English play in MS. is, "If you can't succeed in your own country, how do you expect to succeed in mine?" To go on writing plays in these circumstances an English author has either to be extraordinarily assured of his prestige, or extraordinarily young, ardent, and ignorant of the odds against him. The alternative—to be his own financier—is beyond the means of all but a very few authors. It is not suggested that the speculator's game is an easy one, but by accident rather than by design their policy is anti-English. Not long ago two American men of the theatre left these shores after remarking to a reporter that the British drama was dead. It is not dead, but it is a dog with a bad name, and the Parthian shot of those two Americans was widely reported in the British Press, whose anti-British bias in any artistic matter is a standing marvel. They did not even hold a *post-mortem* on the body; they did not ask, "Who killed Cock Robin?" The reply, if they had asked, would have been, "The flapper-obsessed manager." Happily they are not the only managers, and we have not travelled so soon and so far from our greatest period of drama since

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Elizabeth as to have no writers of the right words who can force their way to production.

Probably the real effects of the American educational movement in drama have still to be felt. That movement is (i) general in that it creates dramatic taste in school-children and is a parallel to our L.C.C. instruction in *musical* appreciation. (But we don't instruct yet in dramatic appreciation. We deliver Shakespeare to the pedagogues and piously hope that children will read him when adults as a rule do not. The new American way is to begin children on modern one-act plays—which both indicates American appreciation of the new drama, and leads the young idea by easy paths to Shakespeare, instead of, as with us, beginning at Mount Everest before they have climbed Parliament Hill.) The American movement is (ii) specialized in giving instruction in dramatic technique. So far, we repeat, the results are in improved craftsmanship rather than in uprisen art, but it is legitimate, by cases like Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Richman, to expect the art to sprout ubiquitously on the prepared ground. Meantime American technique is pressing hard on English drama, and the flapper-managers, artistic Fascisti as they are, are seized by the standardized technical efficiency of American plays.

There is no hope for the unknown English author in managers who won't read his plays ; but what of

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actors ? The English actor complains of American competition, but he is not taking it lying down, and he extends a life-line to the unknown English author by forming Sunday and special societies for the performance of his plays. The trouble is to get the flapper-manager to go to see them ! It is incredible, but true, that the sort of manager who won't read plays declines also to go to see them when they are actually performed for him. This puts a responsibility on the Press, and in the situation of British drama here sketched the 'understudy' critics should not be sent to Sunday-night shows ; if the play is good and the acting notable they deserve all the help toward regular production which the authority of authoritative critics can give them. It is admitted that the critics may often be bored and that Sunday is the Sabbath ; but two of the best post-War authors, Mr C. K. Munro and Mr Edward Percy derive from Sunday societies—the one from the Stage Society and the other from the Repertory Players—and that surely should stimulate the critics to hope for other men of mettle on Sunday nights. The volunteer actors, rehearsing for a month, merit authoritative criticism, and there is more in this than actors putting forth a sample of their work in the hope of getting an engagement. There is definitely a research department of the theatre and an answer to those managers who go to New York to view plays. The answer is that plays are on

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view at home, and criticism can do much to coerce the managers to view these plays. Mr Munro, Mr Percy, Mr Wall, and Mr Monkhouse are enough by themselves to show that Sunday-night plays offer managers a sporting chance of finding something good, something British, and something, also, not burdened by a thousand-pound premium to a New York manager and a stiff royalty.

The stage—that is, the actors—are by Sunday performances retorting upon the New York excursionists and are providing a lifeboat for British drama. A village playwright is, perhaps, the first step; then he gets a play accepted by a Sunday society. Will the managers persist in comparing this production with the smoothness of a pulled-about, doctored Broadway success on its hundredth night? Or will they take some little imagination out with them on Sunday nights? At any rate, if and when another Mr Munro or another Mr Percy is ‘discovered’ by a play society, may the Press be emphatic about him! The production history of *At Mrs Beam’s* is not creditable to English management.

## CHAPTER XV

### *The Theatre Resurgent*

THE theatre is resurgent. In spite of the alliance between Broadway and the rich adventurers who invaded the London theatre, the post-War British drama, if nothing to be jaunty over, gives solid grounds for optimism about the future. It is an admirable point that exhibition pieces of the great period have triumphed before the new audience.

Revivals are not always to be welcomed ; they suggest that the theatre is marking time and living on its own fat instead of marching on ; they are, as a policy, cowardly and akin to the flapper-manager's week-ends in New York ; but, whatever the motive behind the revivals of Barrie, the effect has been to give us back our standards. We have something against which to measure the domestic drama of the United States. *Arms and the Man* came too pat upon the War, and the flappers were still rulers of the roost when *The Admirable Crichton*, with its unfortunately altered ending, was revived ; but the later Barrie revivals have been the great period's demonstration in force, and there was also

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Mr Milne, a builder of bridges between the old and the new.

A curiosity of criticism, both official and unofficial, is that if it finds that it has overrated a man it bites him. Mr Milne is the victim both of over-praise, and, now, of over-depreciation. He does not write dialogue like Hankin, his dialogue may be less neat than Chapin's and perhaps than Davies's, but he uses words which don't offend a cultivated ear, and the bridge-building comes in because *Mr Pim Passes By* belongs to the flapper-ridden times. It pleased the flappers and it didn't offend their fathers; it had it both ways. They are now discovering that Mr Milne is not a great playwright, and they are saying so, tartly. We said of Hankin that he seemed to need some technical expert at his elbow, and the same need seems to be Mr Milne's, but "Hands off my dialogue" would rightly be Mr Milne's condition when he made terms with his technician. The tactics of his plays are (or is it 'is'?) delectable and the strategy weak. But he was the first of the post-War men to get in, and came with charm, with fragile plays—charades, almost—which by their very difference and their courtliness won through at a time when the drama of coarse emotionalism and crude expression had virtual monopoly. He seems, unfortunately, limited by *Punch*—to have written so long for *Punch* as to believe that the *Punch* class is the only class; he

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is, unconsciously no doubt, redoubtably class-conscious. So was Jane Austen if it comes to that; but these times are not her times, and, to take it another way, Mr Milne is a Mayfair and Home Counties man, and his plays, if performed without a star actor or actress, give one the impression of not being 'good provincial properties' in the eye, let us say, of the resident manager in Blackburn. Need they give that impression?

The point is only put because Mr Drinkwater's application of the formula of the chronicle-play to the life of Abraham Lincoln not only clothed a cycle of scenes in prose which had beauty and dignity, but *does* give the impression of being a 'good provincial property' and a good property anywhere in Anglo-Saxondom. A Latin can be stirred by a logical idea, and an Anglo-Saxon by a moral idea; that is why *Abraham Lincoln* succeeds, though its dignified prose is not consistently dramatic, and seems, at times, to turn a theatre into a lecture-hall. The play has background, not because it is historical, but because its author had Repertory experience at Birmingham; it made the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith; but there is also a sense—the money sense—in which the Lyric Theatre made it, and seats accessible to Everyman's purse counted more for it than any imagined inaccessibility of Hammersmith counted against it. They cannot price their circles at five-and-nine-

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pence in the neighbourhood of Piccadilly Circus : the rent profiteers have, at least, done something to prevent those long runs which damage the spontaneity of acting ; they have made the theatre, as to its comfortable seats, a close preserve of the rich, and as the rich are limited in number a short run and a merry one is the fate of a success, and a week's run (more or even less) the fate of a failure. But that is by the way, and long runs at high-priced theatres are not extinct : the point is that *Abraham Lincoln*, a play for Everyman, was made safe for democracy by the Lyric prices, and brought back words to the theatre not only of the West End but of the provinces.

*Lincoln* celebrated a hero, and there is no essential need for a hero to be victorious, but the hero in defeat creates a difficult problem for a dramatist. Mr Drinkwater tackled this problem ably in *Robert E. Lee*, using the same method as in *Lincoln*, with something short of the same effectiveness. His *Oliver Cromwell* fortifies the impression that he is, temperamentally, on the Puritan side in any issue which seems to involve Cavalier and Roundhead : and in the American Civil War, as in our own, those factions, those states of mind, can be perceived opposing each other. With *Lincoln*, a Roundhead with a sense of humour, Mr Drinkwater was more assured of his triumph than with *Lee* of the South. But both plays, thank



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heaven, bear witness to the virtue of simplified staging; and they are Restoration plays because they restore the sovereignty of words in the theatre.

And again bridges, and again. One of them was that other product of Repertory, Mr Lennox Robinson, with his masterly first act and his not quite so masterly *dénouement* of *The Lost Leader*, and with our typical actor of the great period there to give one of his greatest performances. There were the revivals of *Mixed Marriage* and *Jane Clegg*, neither of them very trustworthy bridges, perhaps, but there was solid masonry in the bridge called *The Skin Game*. It was less than a great Galsworthy, but it was a mighty hyphen, and the discovery was made that there is a big public waiting for serious plays if they are produced free of the vice of under-acting. They can, some of them, be acted as melodrama, and if this offends the precisians it is a working compromise, it is bridge-building. In the matter of acting, both *The Skin Game* and *Loyalties* were a bit above themselves (or a bit below themselves?). They were capable of austere production, but undoubtedly good work was done for the theatre at large when Basil Dean declined to produce them with exaggerated respect. He made a big public for Galsworthy, and the experiment to be anticipated with interest is of trying the older and greater Galsworthy plays on the public which, actually, has heard of their author.

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Wouldn't *The Silver Box* do ? Wouldn't the bridge hold ? It held remarkably for *A Bill of Divorcement*, a play good enough to be included with *Rumour* and *Saint Joan* as the Big Three post-War achievements. What makes *A Bill of Divorcement* a rarity among plays which have run in London for a year is that it is, in the Shavian sense, 'unpleasant.' It is strongly, thrillingly emotional, but the emotions it excites are not joyous. And it has fastidious dialogue, so that on two counts at least it is as remote as anything possibly could be from the flapper-manager's ideal of a popular play. It may even have killed the superstition of the necessity of ending happily, for its ending is ruthless. The success of Mr C. K. Munro's *At Mrs Beam's* is no less comforting, but not so surprising. *At Mrs Beam's* is a humorous play in the Repertory idiom, marred by a slightly casual construction, made by keen observation, caustic wit, and character-drawing firm to the point of cruelty. *Hassan* has ruefully to be regarded as a broken bridge, because it is Flecker's posthumous work, and we are not to learn whether he would or would not have become a great dramatist ; but the point, at any rate, remains that *Hassan*, an imperfect play, a pastiche of undecided purpose, glows with words. As closet-drama it is all that the literary critics found it when it was published. As stage-play it has a spinal curvature ; but in either case it has

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rare beauty of language, and if spectacle, ballet, and music must be employed—the necessity is not quite proved—as bait to lure the multitudes to hear a literary play, they have rarely been used upon so just an occasion as in producing *Hassan* on the grandiose scale for the Big Public.

But more striking still is the play *Outward Bound*, by Sutton Vane, because it treats a fresh idea with stark simplicity and compresses into poignant comedy the pith of modern speculation about the after-life. It mirrors the times, because psychic conjecturing is a symptom of the age ; it is the first dramatic flowering of any consequence in this new field ; and it happens technically and emotionally to be a very good play—less than a great play only by reason of some cheapness of thought and some imaginative failure to rise to the full possible height of its theme.

And other post-War significances are *The Faithful Heart*, fragments of a masterpiece with rhetorical lapses when the dialogue reaches bathos ; the first two acts of Miss Brandon's *The Outsider* ; and—the acting of Mr Seymour Hicks in plays not quite worthy of it. Some day, somebody—Mr Harwood seems indicated—must write a play of quality in which Mr Hicks can act as he acted in *The Man in Dress Clothes*. To remember Mr Hicks in that play is to be aware that Sacha Guitry is not unique. It might further be suggested that the

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reservoir of good acting, the light stage from which Marie Tempest and Ethel Irving came, has visible possibilities in Miss Gertrude Lawrence and Miss Binnie Hale. (The hands of Miss Pauline Lord in *Anna Christie* were worth watching; so are the hands of Miss Hale.) And the same light stage has Mr A. W. Bascomb and Mr Herbert Mundin. Revue acting may be cameo acting and it may be specialized acting, but it may also be the nursery of great serious acting, and our present resources are not surveyed fully unless the acting in revues is taken into our credit account; and if this is a transition period it is reassuring to know that in acting, as in authorship, we have the men and the women too. The case of Mr Charles McEvoy may be instanced as a hopeful sign. It is many years from *David Ballard* to *The Likes of Her*, and the time between was not fruitful in good plays by Mr McEvoy. *When the Devil was Ill* was a wet blanket on Miss Horniman's opening night in her own theatre in Manchester, and *All that Matters* was not one of the ornaments of the late Herbert Trench's Haymarket management. Yet in these present times Mr McEvoy 'comes back' and comes up with Cockney comedy of the 'right pithy' sort, and a shaky last act hardly dims the lustre of his achievement in unflinching characterization.

Is it not passing brave to be a king,  
And rise in triumph through Persepolis?

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Or 'passing brave' to be Queen Horniman and to see London in 1923 going to plays of her own Repertory sort? *At Mrs Beam's*, *Robert E. Lee*, *The Likes of Her*, and *Ambush* were running simultaneously; and all four are directly or indirectly Repertory plays, deriving in spirit, if not in every case by their author's history, from that Repertory movement which Queen Horniman's resources first enabled to move. There is not much of the deaf or daft flapper-theatre about those four plays, which, indeed, seriously raise doubts about our being in a transition period; but it is best, perhaps, to regard the present still as a bridge-building time, because the signs give reason to hope that better plays than these will come.

Even the Wembley year, the showman's year of 1924, failed to bring reaction. Two acts of *Havoc* and all of *The Conquering Hero* broke down the sentiment that plays about the War must be shelved; and *Saint Joan* is a crowning mercy. There is enough in those two and a half plays to encourage the most sanguine hopes of our drama's absolute recovery.

What isn't to be questioned is the superiority of the average English play of to-day over the average English play of the nineties. The line of progress, broken by the War, has joined itself, not at its highest point but at a high one, and words have defeated the flapper-theatre and—really it amounts

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almost to a contradiction in terms—‘the silent drama.’ ‘Expressionism’ is in the green sickness of its youth ; it is not, therefore, to be derided, but the more immediate future seems to lie with the play whose comedy is ‘right pithy’ and whose basis is sociological. Emotional plays must, nowadays, have a rational occasion for their emotion, and when a play is not emotional (and, to a useful extent, when it is), humour is the great asset. Historically, English drama is humorous ; that is, most of Jonson, much of Shakespeare, nearly all the Restoration men, Sheridan, and Goldsmith were English *comic* writers. Modernity won’t have the poetic or the heroic play of the Dryden type ; but it will have nearly anything if salted with humour, and to say that the serious dramatist of to-day must be a humorist is not to be paradoxical, but merely to say that he can be as sociological as he pleases, and (as Jack Point sings) “ they don’t blame you so long as you’re funny.” And this is not easy ; it *is* easy to whine about life, even if you dress up your whine fantastically as in *The Insect Play* ; it is not easy to be gay and amusing, and through gaiety to express a serious purpose. But it is the brave way, and anyone who imagines that plays can be written without courage imagines a vain thing. Managers, too, have need of courage—the courage of their convictions, which means that they need convictions first. It was comparatively easy once to have

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convictions, because there was a small number, almost a close corporation, of established playwrights whose plays were rarely refused ; the conviction of the managers in those days was about the playwright rather than about the play ; and audiences then were less difficult because uninfluenced by the New Movement. But to-day the playwright, except Barrie, who is to be trusted is to seek. Playwrights are in and out ; few of them have a fairly steady effective period of twenty years, as Pinero had or as Mr Sutro and Mr Maugham are having. The case of Mr McEvoy has been mentioned—one good play twenty years ago and the next in 1923, and the habit, in general, of the new men to be uneven inhibits managerial trust in them. The judgment has to be of each of their plays, and one has to read it unbiassed by the fact that this man's last play was either a great one or a complete failure. Very many more people are writing passably good plays to-day than there were twenty years ago ; many of them are not so much known as playwrights (which implies regularity) as known as the author of some one good play. They may write others, but they haven't shown staying-power at the top of their form, and their unevenness puts a heavy burden on managerial selectiveness. It is good, no doubt, to get rid of the superstition of ' names ' : the sheep-like, follow-my-leader policy of managers became a byword ; but the diffusion

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of dramatic authorship and the unequal form of writers make the play-reader's lot no happy one. This, after all, is a symptom of the age, and publishers and magazine editors suffer from the inconsistent form of modern authorship in general as much as play-selectors do ; and, in spite of the difficulties, the plays instanced in this chapter serve as ample proof that good plays are written and produced. We want more and better plays, more and not less inducement to write plays, more means of getting them to production when they are written. But the flapper-theatre is plainly in decline, the civilized theatre is plainly in the ascendant, and Drama as the characteristic artistic expression of our times puts up a winning fight against its only possible competitor, the novel.











